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**The Role of Aboriginal Humour in Cultural Survival and
Resistance**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the function of humour in the survival of the Aboriginal people against all odds, including the onslaught of invasion, dispossession, powerlessness and oppression since the British invasion in 1788.

In my ethnographic journey I am doing something different as an Aboriginal researcher in that insider research is used as my principal methodology. I am able to draw on my own understanding of how humour works in practice as well as in theory. The manifestations of Aboriginal humour in everyday life, together with the reasons why given incidents are funny, are an important part of the contextual cultural information that I bring to this thesis.

The oppression of Aboriginal people following European settlement in Australia is marked by government policies which disempowered them, as well the racism which resulted in the clash of cultures and the crisis of identity for Aborigines. In the earlier chapters I draw upon the work of anthropologists, and historians of race relations, to discuss aspects of these issues.

The discussion I provide of humour considers how far the emotions and humour are inextricably entwined, and addresses the elements of them. It is found that humour is a universal phenomenon but its manifestations vary from culture to culture. There is a close relationship between social structures and humour. Earlier anthropologists documented humour's capacity for easing social conflicts, relieving tensions and for promoting order, as they understood it.

When a culture is oppressed by another, this is reflected in how humour is expressed. The thesis briefly discusses three ethnic groups in situations of disempowerment whose specific styles of humour have played a role in cultural survival and whose socio-cultural strategies for survival can be compared with those of Aborigines.

Culture and humour were closely interconnected in Aboriginal society. It is shown how humour worked in particular settings as a complex institutionalised practice central to Aboriginal culture, and how and why it could be used to regulate social behaviour by joking and shaming tactics.

Aboriginal humour had to change, expand or re-form to meet new challenges. Humour was a weapon of the weak and it supported a subculture which grew out of the powerless situation in which Aborigines were placed by the dominant white group. Irony, satire and parody have been strategies of resistance in a colonised and a postcolonising Australia.

Aborigines moved out of a culture of silence. Through using the benefits of education, there was progression towards empowerment. In the final three chapters, Black literature, Aboriginal theatre and black visual art and film are discussed and analysed; these were used to make statements of protest, and there developed a new self-awareness where Aboriginal humour pervaded the creative work in these areas. This demonstrates Aboriginal resilience in the face of dire circumstances which threatened their very survival.

In the conclusion, connections are identified between traditional and more contemporary modes of Aboriginal humour. Despite destructive European impact, it has persisted as a tool of survival, resistance, and the maintenance of identity.

Declaration by the author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

I have clearly stated the contribution of others to my thesis as a whole, including statistical assistance, survey design, data analysis, significant technical procedures, professional editorial advice, and any other original research work used or reported in my thesis. The content of my thesis is the result of work I have carried out since the commencement of my research higher degree candidature and does not include a substantial part of work that has been submitted to qualify for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. I have clearly stated which parts of my thesis, if any, have been submitted to qualify for another award.

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humour, dispossession, racism, resilience, identity, survival, whiteness, Australia, Aborigines, indigeneity

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INTRODUCTION

Murrie humour is an integral and warm concept of Aboriginal society. Black humour is often so delicate that it is hard to locate, and Europeans come off with a baffled feeling without knowing quite why. The experiences, perspectives and needs of many Aboriginal people are so divergent from those of the majority of White Australians, that the reality from a Black perspective is not easily understood by Whites. Aborigines draw humour from situations and definitions about them which would prove painful and offensive if told by Europeans. Non-Aborigines often comment about how Aborigines 'laugh all the time.' Aboriginal people joke on an individual basis with and about one another. This humour is shared by group identification which widens the gap between those within and those outside the circle of laughter. The absence of humour displayed by non-Aboriginal society is conspicuous to Aboriginal society who observe White Australians as 'the serious type who can never take a joke.' Further, humour allows for relief and pleasure, and this helps to explain why it has been notably present among people who seem to outsiders to have little to laugh about. Humour has allowed Black people to laugh, thereby gaining some perspective upon their own anger. Things can be so funny, yet so deadly serious. (Jackie Huggins 1988:8)

At Federation in 1901, Aborigines were excluded from the Australian Constitution because the makers espoused the dominant ideology of the time that Australia's Indigenous peoples were doomed to early extinction. Ironically, the number of Australians proudly identifying themselves as of Aboriginal descent is now approaching the lower estimates (300,000) of the numbers in possession of the Australian continent at the time of the British invasion and subject to subsequent dispossession from 1788 onwards. This thesis examines the role of humour in the survival of the Aboriginal people against all odds. Humour has played a significant part in this survival.

This thesis examines Aboriginal humour in Australia, its distinct specificities, and how it has adapted to changing circumstances during recent centuries. In this Introduction, I consider the historical context in which Aboriginal humour developed and the oppression of Aborigines in colonial and postcolonial Australia; I then provide a discussion of humour *per se*; before embarking on an explanation of the nature of Aboriginal humour. My position as an Aboriginal person enables me to engage uniquely with Aboriginal humour from an insider position. This approach brings a unique perspective to this study of Aboriginal

humour that differs from studies from outside by (White) sociologists and anthropologists, or even insider texts published or produced by Aboriginal writers and directors but which are performed in the presence of dominant White culture, and to some extent are mediated through its institutions. By illustrating this thesis with family recollections, memories and my own experience, I explore the role of humour through my own ethnographic journey, and my participation in both Aboriginal and White society.

My interest in Aboriginal humour is longstanding. It grows out of personal experience both as a child and as an adult when I witnessed humour being used in everyday life. Even as a small child I noticed that humour prevailed in the daily discourse of the adults around me and, as I grew older and attended school, I became painfully aware, also, of the deprivation, hopelessness and apathy which flourished in my social environment. It seemed incomprehensible that people could laugh when there was no apparent reason. I grew up on the fringe of a small, rural town in northern New South Wales where racism was rife. My family always identified as Aboriginal despite the considerable admixture of European blood in our veins. We did not live in an Aboriginal community but we provided hospitality to Aboriginal friends and relatives who passed through town, and because of our regular interaction with other Aborigines we never lost sight of our roots. In any case we were always reminded of our status by the White community if we thought we could interact with them or try to become upwardly mobile.

Historical Context: Racism and Identity Destruction in Australia

In my personal interaction with family members and other Aborigines, it is clear that many accept the premise that humour is used as an identity marker. When the British formed a new colony in Australia, oppression and dispossession of Aborigines began and this quickly led to a crisis of identity for the Indigenous communities. Indeed, for many Indigenous peoples of the world, colonialism brought about crises of identity.

According to the cultural theorist, Edward Said (1993), and historians including C.D. Rowley (1970, 1978), Dee Brown (1970) and Henry Reynolds (1981, 1989, 1990), the “Age of Discovery” begat the age of colonialism. The Age of Discovery is seen in the West as having begun when Christopher Columbus set foot on American soil in 1492, claiming to have found “a new world.” Unfortunately with the age of discovery came colonisation, and colonisation meant dispossession of native people. When the colonisers and native people met, the differences in their cultures meant that they could not coexist. In the first instance, the dominant ideology of the colonisers required that heathen souls should be redeemed and civilised as part of God’s plan, but this ideology co-existed from the start with the imperialist quest for land, wealth and resources. Thus, while economics were always there, ideology justified their operations. Those who owned the land ruled the land. It would seem that the religious and economic aspects of colonialism worked together such that the cultivation of the land and the civilisation of souls became inextricably connected. This was achieved by driving the original owners from their lands to open them up to European colonisation. In regard to the White invasion of the new lands, the colonisers’ sense of superiority in religion, politics and economy led to assumptions about moral entitlement but, in truth, it was the technological superiority, transport and weapons that made their conquests certain.

The impact of policy on Aboriginal identity and cultural survival is evident from the writings of Roberta Sykes who asserts that Aborigines were thrown to the bottom of Australia’s social and economic ladder by “the theft of their land and the usurpation of their status as owners of this country” (1989:22). This is the view of influential historical and social commentators including Henry Reynolds (1981, 1989, 1990), Richard Broome (1982), Peter Hanks and Bryan Keon-Cohen (1984) Rosalind Kidd (1987), Bain Attwood (1989), and Andrew Markus (1990). Peter Hanks argues that not only did White colonisers dispossess Aboriginal people of their land, but “[t]he Europeans regarded Aborigines as a problem to be regulated, confined, protected or solved” (Hanks 1984:19). Government policies and practices disempowered Aborigines from the very beginning of their colonisation in this country.

A significant feature of the British expropriation of Australian land was the doctrine of terra nullius, that suggested that Australia in 1799 was a land without owners. Henry Reynolds cites the Latin concept as obscure but meaning “a land belonging to no one.” He adds: “European powers adopted the view that countries without political organisation, recognisable systems of authority and legal codes could legitimately be annexed” (Reynolds 1987:12). In 1989 he commented: “This enabled the settlers to convince themselves they had a legal and moral right to the land because Australia had never become the property of Aborigines” (Reynolds 1989:67). This idea animated the first generation of settlement in Australia.

Christine Stafford concludes that the colonisers’ attempts to solve the Aboriginal “problem” resulted not only in alienating them from their land, but also in measures to “exterminate, control, protect, segregate, assimilate and integrate” (Stafford 1984:289) them. These measures were extreme, both in their application, and in their impact; and are graphically described by Bruce Elder in *Blood on the Wattle* (1988) and more recently by Timothy Bottoms in *Conspiracy of Silence: Queensland’s Frontier Killing Times* (2013). Elder details the massacres and maltreatment of Aborigines since 1788 and the impact these atrocities had on the Indigenous populations. He ends his last chapter with this statement: “The blood of tens of thousands of Aborigines killed since 1788, and the sense of despair and hopelessness which informs so much modern day Aboriginal society, is a moral responsibility all White Australians share. Our wealth and lifestyle is a direct consequence of Aboriginal dispossession. We should bow our heads in shame” (Elder 1988:200).

Ideologies of Whiteness

Recently, these interactions have been re-thought in terms of Whiteness, a critical theory which has been promulgated since the 1980s by mostly Black academics in the United States, but is also of interest to Australian writers on Indigenous matters and Australian academics, particularly Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Black activist Malcolm X insisted that White identity grew from the

experience of dominating rather than from biology or culture; and his claim has long found expression in African-American thought. Simply put, he claimed that Whiteness was not colour, but rather an ideology that developed out of a desire to rule (Carter 2004:14). Theodore Allen sees White identity as emerging from the imperative to dispossess, subjugate and at times enslave people (as noted in Carter 2004:15). So what is Whiteness and how did it affect the upward mobility of Aboriginal people in Australian society? To find answers we need to refer to Cheryl Harris' "Whiteness as Property." Harris connects Whiteness with power and defines Whiteness as a form of status property; she also argues that it defined the legal status of a person. "Whiteness was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings ... In this respect Whiteness has been used and enjoyed" (Harris 1993:1721). She further adds, "Whiteness as property was the critical core of a system that affirmed the hierarchical relations between Black and White" (Harris 1993:1745). There are some clear similarities to be found between in the African-American and Aboriginal experiences. Harris describes Whiteness as a property related to dominance, established through historical and current processes of colonisation, and as only possessed by Whites. "The possessors of Whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges inherent in Whiteness; Whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded" (Harris 1993:1736). She adds, further, that it became crucial to be White and to be identified as White. To have the property of Whiteness was to have the "characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings" (Harris 1993:1721). This mindset found a notable expression in North America, as Harris demonstrates, with slavery — the commodification of human beings. "In early American society, slavery as a legal institution treated slaves as collateral property that could be transferred, assigned, inherited or posted as collateral ... the Black colour of race raised the assumption of slavery and Whiteness became a shield from slavery." So slavery was the ultimate "devaluation of human life," and Whiteness the source of freedom and privilege (Harris 1993:1720). The end result was that Whiteness defined the legal status of any person as slave or free. This helps us to understand how Whiteness became a highly valued property in the lives of Americans, in that it conferred "tangible and economically valuable

benefits.” It was only allowed to those who met a strict standard of proof. “The law constructed Whiteness as an objective fact, although in reality it is an ideological proposition imposed through subordination” (Harris 1993:1731).

The British sociologist Ruth Frankenberg, who did most of her research in the U.S., in *White Women, Race Matters*, identifies three processes of “thinking through race” as three categories of White consciousness which affect the hegemonic ideology of the West, in which White supremacy is dominant: essentialist racism; colour and power evasiveness or blindness (dodging difference) and race cognisance. She adds there are also three features of Whiteness: a location of structural advantage; a standpoint of race privilege and participation in cultural practices perceived as normal (Frankenberg 1993:169–70). These can also be observed in Australia since colonisation.

Recognising oneself as White requires the premise of White supremacy. “It assumes that Black ancestry in any degree extending to generations far removed, automatically disqualifies claims to White identity,” and it deems White as unadulterated, exclusive and rare. Inherent in this concept was “the right to the exclusion and subordination of Blacks” (Harris 1993:1737).

If Black ancestry “tainted” any individual’s blood, they could not claim to be White, “regardless of the fact that they may have been indistinguishable from a White person and have descended from a family that lived as Whites. Although socially acceptable as White, they could not be legally White” (Harris 1993:1738).

My own family serves as an example of how Harris’s arguments are relevant to Australia. My mother and her siblings were classed as “quarter castes” by the government standards of the early 1900s. My mother and her sisters spent their working lives in servitude in the homes of the landed gentry, acquiring excellent homemaking and domestic skills. My aunties married White men but my mother married an Aborigine so my siblings and I, because of the darker pigment of our skin could not pass as White, as could our blond-haired and blue-eyed cousins. Unfortunately, they were always reminded of their Aboriginal ancestry and were

excluded from White society whose members taunted them with “having a touch of the tar brush.”

My siblings and I were reared by our aunt and her White husband. Our home had a kitchen, four bedrooms and a veranda. We subsisted on eggs, milk and vegetables from the resources we had at our disposal – namely our chickens, cows and vegetable plots. Yet the townsfolk claimed we lived in “a Blacks’ camp.” As Harris asserts, although most Whites hold no real power, all can claim their privileged identity. So it “remains a concept based on relations of power, a social construct predicated on White dominance and Black subordination.” She concludes that, “Whiteness is not simply and solely property. It is simultaneously an aspect of self-identity and personhood” (Harris 1993:1725). Further references to Whiteness will be made in subsequent chapters of this thesis and I will draw on her arguments, as well as those of Frankenberg, Moreton-Robinson, and others, as theoretical framework for some key points that I will make.

Ever since the European invaders came to Australia in large numbers from 1788, the history of Aboriginal and White relations in Australia has been, to say the least, an inglorious one. For over two hundred years following the invasion, Aborigines have been subjected to, and are the products of a number of government policies and practices which, unfortunately for Aborigines, reflected the imperialist background of, and the Whiteness ideology held by Europeans. The generation of my family that includes my mother, my aunts and my uncles, living through the turn of the last century, was affected by these policies and practices, particularly by the restrictions on movement and employment choices where they often found themselves under close scrutiny by the police. My relatives received a good education for that point in time because they were able to attend the school on the station where their father worked, but many other Aborigines of their generation were not so fortunate. In the main, my family members were able to understand government policies and resist being regulated on missions. Nevertheless at the same time they were controlled by the forces of racism, especially that of the colour bar. I, too, was a victim and I elaborate on my personal experience later on in the thesis.

In recent times, an opposing view of colonial settlement in Australia has become more widely-circulated, making it seem “two histories but one country.” Heated debates about Australia’s colonial history have driven Australian politics for a long time. Paul Keating, in his role of Prime Minister, delivered a speech in 1992 placing the Aboriginal experience of dispossession at the centre of Australian nationhood; on the other hand, his successor, Prime Minister John Howard, soon after his election in 1996, rejected what he saw as the guilt-driven “black armband” view of history, a term coined by the celebrated conservative historian Geoffrey Blainey in 1990. In expressing concern at Blainey’s view of history, anthropologist and prehistorian John Mulvaney answered that “right wing political correctness is being used to rewrite Australian history” (Fickling 2003:19). More recently, a sometimes ugly debate has raged following the publication of historian Keith Windschuttle’s book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, which sets out to challenge the assertions of his peers, chiefly Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan, that Indigenous Australians were slaughtered in great numbers in this country’s colonisation. Windschuttle claimed in an interview on ABCTV’s *Lateline* (4 September 2003), that the presentation of history in Australia had been hijacked by the socialist left at the expense of the conservative right. The argument that Windschuttle has with Reynolds and Ryan boils down to little more than interpretation of the numbers, with Windschuttle arguing the violence represents the “least frequent and extensive of all Britain’s colonial ventures” (Fickling 2003:19).

My understanding of Australian history over the past 200 years gives great authority to what has been passed on to us in the “here and now” by those of us in the “then and there.” During my childhood in the 1940s there were old people still living who remembered the killings and massacres; either by personal witness or from being told firsthand by an old relative who had survived to tell the tale before passing away.

But history surely consists of hard data such as written evidence too, and Rosalind Kidd, in a broadcast on ABC Radio National, stated that studying thousands of documents and hundreds of files had demonstrated that the dark side of Australia’s colonial history is not hearsay nor conjecture, but supported

by written evidence. The land seizures, the massacres and abductions of Aboriginal children did happen, and printed evidence is hardly inaccessible. Journalist Tony Koch found that a five-minute search of the archives of the *Courier-Mail* (2 Aug 2003) turned up a report of a massacre in September 1882 just north of Brisbane at Caboolture. Informants stated that the Aborigines had done nothing wrong to justify attack by native police under the charge of a Lieutenant Wheeler who claimed he was acting under instructions to disperse the Blacks wherever they congregated. Koch writes that a periodical of the same decade, the *Queenslander*, illuminates the jargon of the time. It says: "How many of us understand the euphemistic word 'dispersal.' If it is advisable that, as a colony, we should indulge in wholesale murder of the Aboriginal race, let us have the courage to openly call it murder and not dispersal." Indigenous artist Fiona Foley invokes this play of meaning in her 2008 artwork, *Dispersed* (Helmrich et al. 80-81; see Foley Figure 12).

Koch goes on to write, "similarly on October, 28, 1876, it became necessary for the government of the day to issue a memo stating: 'It has come to the notice of the government that the police have, in some instances, used whips to expel Aborigines from certain towns, it is hereby notified for general information that such practice must be discontinued. Any member of the Force who flogs or authorises the flogging of an Aborigine will be instantly dismissed'" (*Courier-Mail* 25/1/03).

While the attempts to exterminate Aborigines failed, policies designed to control, protect, segregate and assimilate them succeeded only in achieving chronic destitution and oppression of Aboriginal people for generations, to the extent that it yet remains to be seen whether integration is successful. Hanks (1984) saw Aborigines as occupying a separate and unique position in Australian society at that time and he presented a number of reasons for this. In the first instance he draws attention to their Indigenous status in Australia. They are the product of over 40,000 years of occupation and use of this land prior to the European presence. Studies of Aboriginal rock carving now suggest Aborigines have inhabited Australia for as long as 60 000 years. Next he notes that the situation of Aborigines is the outcome of European attempts to exterminate and exclude

them from the mainstream of Australian society. This produced violence, loss of culture, and exploitation, the course of which underlines the extraordinary “resilience, cohesion and survival, of Aboriginal people” (1984:19). I find there is little dispute about the reasons which Hanks presents for Aborigines’ resilience and cohesion against all odds, and the role that humour played in this is explored in this thesis.

The Significance of Humour

Humour is a universal phenomenon and it is part of our everyday life to take part in creating or participating in humour. Christopher Wilson points out that writers including Aristotle, Hobbes, Descartes, Kant and Schopenhauer have tried to define the “evasive essence of humour,” and he suggests that “humour is everywhere but defies definition” (1979:3). Humour is complex in that there simply is not one definition that covers all its aspects: for example, humour can be expressed through laughter, teasing and joking. Humour includes irony, satire, sarcasm and parody, among other forms. A good place to start is the context in which it operates and I suggest that one can only understand humour against its particular cultural backdrop. It permeates the whole culture and is, accordingly, intangible. This makes writing about humour difficult, as is writing about the emotions. Mahadev Apte (1985:194) claims that in anthropological studies in particular, humour has not received as much focus as areas such as marriage, kinship, socialisation patterns, technology and religion. I suggest that when these elements of a culture are studied, the relevance and the function of humour should also be taken into account. Humour is then demystified and becomes a tangible entity to be written about. If we agree that humour is an emotional response to culturally specific elicitors, we can then proceed in the quest to discover the nature of Aboriginal humour.

Daniel Goleman points out that “a view of human nature that ignores the emotions is sadly short-sighted” (Goleman 1996:4), but the precise meaning of emotions has concerned psychologists and philosophers and has been a centre of debate for centuries. The theories found in philosophy, psychology and

anthropology retain the standard use of emotion to cover phenomena such as fear, anger, sorrow, joy compassion, grief, remorse, envy, jealousy, guilt, gratitude and other affective states. Robert Solomon wrote in 1980 that emotions are rational and purposive rather than irrational. James Averil stated that emotions are social constructs, examining socio-cultural, biological and psychological influences on the discharge of emotions, and naming three main elements, the cognitive, the biological and the psychological (Averil 1980:37).

Claire Armon-Jones argued in 1986 that although theories of emotions have emerged in recent decades, historically there had been a tendency to define emotions as biologically primitive or instinctive responses to happenings in everyday life. For a considerable period of time, researchers argued over which emotion should be considered primary or, even, if there were such a thing as a primary emotion and, in addition, how emotions should be categorised. Armon-Jones stresses that emotions are socio-culturally constituted and, using the theory of constructionism, claims that emotions are determined by the systems of belief and the values of a particular society. For instance, feelings of shame or guilt are culturally elicited and what is shameful in one society may not be in another. Overall, emotions play a very important role in our lives at cultural, social, personality and biological levels. Humour and the emotions are closely entwined — emotion is the interface between the situational cause and the cultural responses, one of which is humour. In 1996, Goleman conceded that the debate was still continuing. In defining emotion, he says that biological propensities to act are shaped further by our life experiences and our culture.

Aboriginal Humour

In pursuing a definitive answer to what is distinctive about Aboriginal humour, the argument can be made that it has specific roles and functions to those in the wider community. W.E.H. Stanner stated in his essay “Aboriginal Humour” that although in most respects the Aboriginal scene is the universal scene, Aboriginal humour has a “twist of its own” (Stanner 1982:42). It is this twist all its own — in other words, its uniqueness — that is investigated here.

There are, different varieties of the uses of language that produce the effects of humour, but some relate particularly to Aboriginal humour. The first of these is carnival. This term is associated with the Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, who studied festive folk laughter. Carnival refers to extravagant celebrations such as those on the day before Lent, when Christians celebrate Mardi Gras before Ash Wednesday. These celebrations allowed commoners to be temporarily free to transgress written and unwritten social and ecclesiastical laws (Murfin and Ray 2003:48). Later in this thesis, reference is also made to Butwin's concept of "seditious laughter."

Comedy may also be categorised as high or low. Low comedy relies on the crude or the obvious to evoke laughter, and this includes situational comedies, farces and slapstick works where wit is the essential element of comedy. The high comedy of more recent times is sometimes referred to as intellectual comedy or the comedy of ideas (Murfin and Ray 2003:66). Comic relief occurs when a humorous scene or passage is inserted in an otherwise serious work where it is intended to provide an emotional outlet and change of pace as well as a contrast that further emphasises the seriousness of the work (Murfin and Ray 2003:205). Aboriginal writers and actors have made good use of comic relief in their writing and stage productions as is highlighted in chapters four and five.

Hyperbole, a figure of speech that uses deliberate exaggeration to achieve effect, is sometimes called overstatement (Murfin and Ray 2003: 205). Aborigines have used this to great effect, particularly in their daily life and in the theatre.

Irony, sarcasm and satire have also been used by Aborigines to produce effects of humour in their writing and stage productions and, especially, recent visual art where irony has become an art form, as discussed in chapter six.

Briefly, irony often depends on understatement, and it is probably one of the most potent of humorous weapons and the subtlest of comic forms. Verbal irony is the most common kind of irony and is used specifically when the speaker says the opposite of what he or she actually thinks. In other words, it is a rhetorical device that involves saying one thing but meaning another. The tone of voice often keys the reader/listener in to the irony. There is also situational irony,

which is derived from events or situations as opposed to statements made by individuals. Sometimes the individual may not understand the irony of a situation, although unintended consequences may also be linked to irony. Murfin and Ray give an example of this occurring when a group of college men wanted to avoid being drafted for service in Vietnam. Their college applications for exemption alerted authorities to cancel their exemption and set in train their being drafted to serve in Vietnam (Murfin and Ray 2003:223).

Satire and sarcasm are related, but satire differs from sarcasm in that “The satirist derides humanity primarily in an effort to better it. Satire may generate laughter but essentially has a moral purpose.” Sarcasm, by contrast, is “intentional derision generally directed to another person and intended to hurt” (Murfin and Ray 2003:425).

Finally, repartee and parody are the vehicles for mocking and evoking laughter through apt and witty phrasing; they are generally observed, for example, in slapstick comedy. Examples of repartee are to be found in the plays of Black writers such as Kevin Gilbert, Robert Merritt and Jack Davis, who are discussed in chapter five below.

This thesis explores some continuities between contemporary Aboriginal humour in urban and bush situations and Aboriginal humour in more traditional settings. For the purposes of this study, with reference to Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin’s usage in their article “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious,” the term traditional implies “an authentic continuation of cultural behaviour and expression from the past and into the present” (Handler 273); and this is discussed further in later chapters. In particular, my thesis examines the effect of oppression upon Aboriginal humour. Aborigines suffered oppression through White contact and control, and this contact and control affected every aspect of culture, livelihood and way of life, language and religion. Aborigines suffered massive disempowerment, and this has had a profound effect on the expression of Aboriginal humour. I demonstrate that Aboriginal humour has been a means of social coping with oppression within Aboriginal communities, but that it has also functioned as a muted or encoded form of opposition and rebellion when turned on often unsuspecting White authority figures. Humour was used

particularly as regulation and social control in earlier traditional society and was readily adaptable for such new challenges.

With reference to the oppression inflicted on Aborigines over recent centuries, this thesis explores the way that humour has been used as a coping strategy and as a form of muted opposition to these forces of oppression. It describes the emergence of overt Black protest and the use of humour as a “weapon of the weak” particularly in Aboriginal literature, theatre, visual art and in everyday life. It describes the present situation, and indicates what is specific about current Aboriginal humour, as compared with that of other ethnic groups, and humour generally in the wider Australia community.

Identity and Cultural Survival

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, made a profound impact on education and the Latin-American struggle for national development. In *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*, he records his experiences of sharing his early life with the poor; he was able to witness, first-hand, extreme situations of poverty and underdevelopment in the Third World. His experiences led him to the discovery of what he termed, “the culture of silence of the dispossessed” (Freire 1985:50, 71–75, 95).

In 1985, Freire described a dependent society as, by definition, a silent society with no authentic voice. Only when the oppressed break out of the culture of silence and win their right to speak do they refuse to be dominated and oppressed and become persons in their own right. Earlier, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire discussed the terms “humanisation and dehumanisation,” maintaining that, throughout history, both practices have been apparent, but only humanisation is a valid vocation. While humanisation is thwarted by the injustice, exploitation, oppression and violence of the oppressors, by the same token, humanisation is “affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom, justice and the struggle to recover their own humanity” (Freire 1972:20). Freire cautions that the struggle for humanity is only worthwhile if the oppressed do not, in turn, become oppressors themselves: in liberating themselves they should

also liberate the oppressors. Freeing the oppressors is a task of those who have lived under oppression because those who oppress cannot find it in their power to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only the power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong for both (Freire 1972:20).

Freire describes the illiterate as “empty and undernourished” because they lack the “bread of the spirit.” This is consistent with the concept of knowledge as food, and of illiteracy as a “poison herb,” intoxicating and debilitating to those who cannot read or write. Thus, the eradication of illiteracy is necessary to cure disease: when the illiterate become educated, they come to a new awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at their social situation. Often they take the initiative to change the society that denied them participation. He identifies “lethargy and ignorance” as the products of economic, social and political domination of which the dispossessed are victims. It was clear to him that the education system was one of the major instruments for the maintenance of the culture of silence. Clearly, Freire echoes the experience of Aborigines as they, too, are on a par with the dispossessed about whom he writes.

In his arguments about the advantages of literacy in breaking the culture of silence, Freire focuses on identity. He maintains that “at no time can there be a struggle for liberation and self-affirmation without the formation of identity. Without identity of the individual and identity of the social group ... there is no impulse to struggle.” Aboriginal identity is pertinent to their sense of empowerment and this is discussed in chapter three. The dominant culture inculcates negative attitudes in the oppressed towards their own culture by instilling in them notions of their culture as “ugly and inferior.” In truth, Freire asserts, the dominated are human beings who have been forbidden to be what they are and who have been denied the right to express themselves. Again, this analysis applies to the social situation of Aboriginal people for most of the period since 1788.

Freire contends that at a specific point in the process of liberating themselves, the dominated begin to mobilise. Mobilisation is at first minimal, but increases as it takes on different contexts. The experience of uniting and discovering their

culture belongs to them. This awareness encourages the dispossessed to liberate themselves from the dominant culture. Aborigines began to mobilise during the years of assimilation, but the process gathered momentum in the early 1970s, and was supported by the world-wide human rights movement.

In their struggle for liberation, Aborigines had to take the initiative and develop their own strategies; this included incorporating some of those of the dominant society, particularly the use of education. Freire says: "When the dominated culture perceives the need to liberate itself, it has to take the initiative and develop its own strategies as well as use those of the dominant culture" (Freire 1985:193). The dominated "incorporate some of the dimensions of the dominant culture to serve as the very instruments of their own struggle" (Freire 1970:193). In chapters five and six, I examine how Aborigines made effective use of education, previously the domain of White Australians, to achieve freedom from the constraints of oppression and to achieve pride in identity by the production of literary, dramatic and visual arts.

Methodology: Insider Research

My own small family group resembles those described by Beckett (1965), Bell (1964), Fink (1957) and Reay (1946) who conducted studies in western New South Wales of groups of Aborigines living on reserves or in dwellings on the fringes of rural towns. In these instances, group norms governed the behaviour of its members, and group purposes of cooperation, mutual aid, generosity and hospitality were highly developed, affording members social and economic security. This ideology was effective because members closely identified with it, and cooperated strongly with it to ensure the continuation of the benefits. It was a reciprocal ideology in which, as Bell stated in 1964: "The group offers its members a haven from an unfriendly White world" (1964:406). I grew up in an atmosphere where face-to-face relationships were of primary importance. We were saved from cultural isolation only by the direct contact of kin and affines moving around the countryside. These movements were sometimes voluntary but were mainly for economic reasons such as availability of employment. These

contacts were always greeted with great excitement because they afforded relief from the day-to-day drudgery of existence in a sub-cultural vacuum. In addition to the exchange of news about kin and friends, there was an abundance of good-humoured laughter and banter in recounting humorous episodes and much teasing and joking all round. The euphoria of their visits sustained us for days after their departure.

My uncles and brother, particularly, were masters of humour and superb actors who saw humour in all that was mundane in our daily existence. My brother was an excellent communicator who always loved a good yarn. He saw the funny side of any situation in spite of hard times, and his story-telling never failed to bring laughter and enjoyment into our lives. His powers of observation were sharp and he could mimic people's actions, mannerisms and voices accurately. It was uncanny to witness such a rare gift of mimicry.

Despite the brevity of her schooling, my mother was the best educated in her family and could have been a high-achiever if the opportunities we enjoy today had been available in the early 1900s. She placed a high value upon education and, when it became clear that I was coping well at school, I received encouragement from her and my aunts, because they did not want me to follow in their footsteps and become a servant for the White people. My close family always referred to me as "the little scholar." This always embarrassed me, but it was always expected that I would enter a profession and I did so by becoming a school teacher. I taught in schools in Indigenous communities for several years, but before I commenced duties I had to do a "crash course" in anthropology at Sydney University where my mentors were Professor Elkin, Dr. Mervyn Meggitt, Dr. I. H. Bell and Dr. A. Capell. This was the genesis of my long term interest in anthropology. Many years later I completed postgraduate studies in that field at the Australian National University. My Bachelor of Letters thesis was entitled "Shame in Australia." I always intended to follow up my studies of shame with a study of humour in Aboriginal Australia, and this thesis is the fulfilment of my long-standing aspirations. This project represents an effective combination of my life experiences as an Aboriginal woman, my studies in anthropology and education, and my contribution to Indigenous Studies in Australia.

Douglas Foley, Bradley Levinson and Janise Hurtig in 2001 commented upon “the growing influence of ‘insider’ ethnic and gender research,” especially for the “identity and culture” of students studying U.S.-based anthropology of education. Their assessment is that, “Scholars of color ... including what some now call ‘halfie’ anthropologists, are among the most visible and important insider ethnographers to have arrived on the intellectual scene.” Their comments upon “‘Insider’ ethnographers become a species of border crosser” also applies to my own experience. Their description of how insider ethnographers work relates closely to my practice and aims. Foley et al say: “They construct insider ethnographic knowledge using conceptual tools from the academy, and they present this knowledge in a way that renders their subjects’ actions and beliefs comprehensible and sympathetic to outsiders and insiders alike” (2001: 37).

This thesis brings together my personal experience of humour in Aboriginal culture with the scholarly literature on the topic – which rarely concentrates upon humour – in order to reposition humour as an important facet of Aboriginal life, and central to Aboriginal survival.

Chapter Outline

In chapter one, I explore my ethnographic journey, beginning with the crisis of identity as experienced by many Aboriginal people under White domination, and detail my research methodology. Because humour is seen as an identity marker for Aboriginal groups, the focus is mainly on the crisis of identity and the importance of group solidarity. Reference is made to Arthur Leonard Epstein (1978), Deirdre Jordan (1988), and Howard Creamer (1988) as sources of information on Aboriginal identity in the first two hundred years following the invasion.

In describing my ethnographic journey which entails my methodology, research goals and strategies, I use insider research as my principal methodology. I am doing something quite different as an Aboriginal researcher in that I am able to draw on my own understanding of how humour works in practice as well as in theory. The manifestations of Aboriginal humour in everyday life, together with

the reasons why given incidents are funny, comprise the contextual cultural information that I bring to this thesis. To strengthen my approach I have drawn upon a number of writers and theorists, including Robert Sholte (1972), Robert Merton (1972), Pierre Bourdieu (1977), John Aguilar (1981), Michel de Certeau (1988) and, more recently, Anita Heiss.

Prior to the study of Aboriginal humour, a review is conducted in chapter two of the elements of emotion and humour. It is found that humour is a universal phenomenon, but its manifestations vary from culture to culture and from one group to another, because its content, styles, and purposes are culturally specific.

Where one cultural group is oppressed by another, this is reflected in how humour is expressed. This chapter focuses on Native American humour as an ethnic group whose specific style of humour has been identified as playing a role in cultural survival. African-American humour has also had a continuing influence on Aboriginal humour through the Black Power movement and Black women singers/artists such as Chrystos (the Native Canadian performer). International political groupings like the Indigenous Forum have also been influential. These uses of humour as socio-cultural strategies for survival are compared and contrasted with those of Aborigines. These groups were chosen because they not only share the experience of oppression, but have long traditions of humour, oratory, folk-lore and ritual. Because of the close relationship between social structure and humour, it is shown that, as the earlier anthropologists emphasised, humour has an immense capacity for easing social conflicts and relieving tensions, and for promoting order, not only within, but between social groups.

Chapter three demonstrates that culture and humour were closely connected in traditional Aboriginal society. I draw upon personal history to show how humour works in particular settings as a complex institutionalised practice, central to Aboriginal culture. White anthropologists, writing in the 1970s such as S.F. Nadel (1971) and Simon Roberts (1979), explain their views of how people in pre-capitalist societies regulate social interaction by using strategies such as shaming, teasing, ridicule and humour. Roberts comments on the role of buffoons and clowns who acted to “take the edge off disputes” (63). William

Lloyd Warner (1964) had described the 1958 Ullmark ceremony of the Murgin people where clowns diffuse tensions within the group which might disrupt the ritual. Petrie (1983) and Mervyn J. Meggitt (1962) reported how strict discipline in preparing boys for initiation was combined with humour. Ribald humour occurs in Aboriginal society but it is often organised under definite social sanctions, usually along kinship lines. D.F. Thomson (1935, 1946, 1972) recorded examples of swearing, both organised and unorganised, as well as descriptions of the joking relationship. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) defined the joking relationship “in primitive society” as one “between two persons in which one is by custom permitted to, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence” (1952:90).

Other anthropologists, including Robert Tonkinson (1987), W.E.H. Stanner, (1978), (1982); Patrick McConvell,(1982), and linguist Cliff Goddard (1992), have noted instances of joking relationships and these are included in this chapter. The comments of Anne Eckermann (1977), Annette Hamilton (1981) and Julie Carter (1988) on the socialisation of children are also discussed. Shaming was very powerful as a mechanism for social control as was teasing and the assigning of nicknames. It is shown in this chapter how and why these strategies are employed and to what effect.

The greatest challenge Aborigines had to face was that of survival, humour had to change, expand or reform to meet new challenges. Gillian Cowlishaw (1988), Jeremy R. Beckett (1988) and Julie Carter (1988) present a picture of the oppositional culture up to the Bicentenary of invasion, and how the use of humour supported this subculture which grew out of the powerless situation. Some examples of humour in the everyday lives of Aborigines are used to demonstrate their resilience in the face of dire circumstances which threatened their very survival. Despite manifestations of the oppositional culture, Aborigines remained substantially powerless until the 1960s.

Chapter four discusses Aboriginal humour in fiction and poetry as part of the breaking of the “great silence” identified by Stanner in 1968. The first National Aboriginal Writers’ Conference in 1983 was an important landmark, as was the publication of the two anthologies, *Inside Black Australia* (1988) and *Paperbark*

(1990). The chapter discusses some Aboriginal poetry, and prose fiction (often with strong elements of autobiography), set in both rural and urban environments. Aboriginal women have been prominent in this area, winning a number of Unaipon Awards and other prizes, and attracting increasing visibility for their work.

In chapter five, I discuss how Aborigines freed themselves from the “culture of silence.” The importance of Black art and literature is highlighted and it is shown how humour pervades the writings of Black authors, including some fiction and poetry. The theatre is often described as a weapon of the weak. Bertold Brecht’s vision and practice of theatre and Augusto Boal’s work on the theatre of the oppressed are used as frames for discussing some Aboriginal theatre.

Information is provided in this chapter about the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s which promoted a strong Indigenous theatre movement. Playwrights including Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Gerald Bostock and Robert Merritt had a message for White Australia about the plight of Aborigines, but the “deadly” seriousness of this message was offset by the use of humour. Adam Shoemaker (1989) points out that, while the distinctive approach to humour is visible in their drama, “its roots are in the tribal/traditional sphere” (1989: 235). Wesley Enoch (1999) and Justine Saunders (1989) claim that these writers are generally known as the first wave of Black dramatists. They point out that the second wave which began in the 1980s, turned its attention to Black culture itself and, by so doing, explores its complexity (*QWC News Magazine* 74 (May 1999). *Box the Pony* by Leah Purcell and Scott Rankin, *Solid* by Kelton Pell and Josie Ningali Lawford, *The Mary G Show* by Mary Gedarrdyu, and *Bran Nue Dae* by Jimmy Chi belong to this second wave, and depict Aboriginal culture in humorous ways.

Until recently, Black humour in visual art has not received the attention that it has in writing and the theatre. In chapter six, the focus is on humour in the visual art of Black artists. This medium has been successfully used by such artists, including Lin Onus, Julie Gough, Bianca Beetson, Gordon Hookey, Richard Bell, Fiona Foley and Destiny Deacon.¹ Black humour in film is addressed with

¹ For more on these artists’ work, see: *TABOO* by Brook Andrew (curator and contributing artist); *Spirit in the Land* curated by Robert Lindsay and Penny Teale for Lin Onus (contributing artist);

reference to the productions: *Nice Coloured Girls*, directed by Tracey Moffatt; *Radiance*, directed by Rachel Perkins (play and screenplay by Louis Nowra); *Endangered*, written and directed by Tracey Rigney; *Kooris in the Mist* written by Pauline Whyman and Mark Stewart; *Too Many Captain Cooks* written by Paddy Wainburranga (directed by Penny McDonald); *Two Bob Mermaid* written and directed by Darlene Johnson; *The Tracker* written and directed by Rolf de Heer; and lastly, *Ten Canoes* written and directed by Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr with Aboriginal collaborators.

In this thesis, connections are identified between traditional and more contemporary modes of Aboriginal humour. Despite destructive European impact, the pervasive persistence of humour as a tool for survival has generated feelings of identity and belonging that have sustained Aborigines in their struggle for existence, and their rights as a First Nations people.

Tayenebe : Tasmanian Aboriginal Women's Fibre Work by Julie Gough (curator and contributing artist); *Putsch / proppaNow*, curated by Liz Nowell, for Bianca Beetson and Gordon Hookey (contributing artists), also "Gordon Hookey," QAGoma blog, blog.qag.qld.gov.au/tag/Gordon-hookey; *String Theory : Focus on Contemporary Australian Art*, curated by Glenn Barkley for Richard Bell (contributing artist); *Strange Fruit* and *Forbidden* by Fiona Foley (curator and artist); and *Avoiding Myth & Message : Australian Artists and the Literary World*, curated by Glenn Barkley, for Destiny Deacon (contributing artist), and *Walk and Don't Look Blak* by Destiny Deacon.

CHAPTER 1: MY ETHNOGRAPHIC JOURNEY

Because identity touches the core of the self, it is also likely to be bound by powerful affect (Epstein 1978:101).

Arnold Leonard Epstein defines identity as close to the “core of the self” (1978:101). In order to better understand his definition, we need to analyse the word “core.” Core is the central, innermost or most essential part of anything. Mindful of this, I can say the core or the centre is the part where growth originates; thus, it is the central element of one’s being. Epstein goes on to say that identity gives a person autonomy. With this in mind, it is important for me to confront identity and autonomy as they pertain to Aborigines, and my role as an inside researcher. In this chapter, I examine the methodology of insider research, and theorisation of Aboriginal individual and group identity as it has been shaped by historical dispossession, the experience of marginalisation in our own lands, and its contemporary legacy; I also self-reflexively consider the life experiences of my own extended family and my experiences as an Aboriginal teacher in a Mission school. Combined with the mainstream skills and informed understanding of the scholarly researcher, these experiences give me a unique insight into the relationship between Aboriginal and White cultures. Finally, I consider Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, and argue that humour is a social formation that operates beyond the formal rules favoured by conventional anthropology, and, as a result, is not well understood by outsider research alone. My research as an Aboriginal “border crosser” bridges the position of insider and outsider, enabling me to demonstrate how Aboriginal people, in the cross-cultural setting of urban Australia, have adapted a culturally-specific style of traditional, or modified bush humour that functions as a means of coping with disempowerment under White Anglo-Celtic power and cultural dominance.

Insider versus Outsider Research

Insider research is the study of one’s own culture. This has been a contentious issue in anthropology because traditionally the discipline has been dedicated to

understanding the Western academics' non-Western other. The insider doctrine considers that some groups have privileged access to research information while others are also able to gain that access, but with much greater cost and effort. Advocates of insider research, such as John Aguilar for example, argue that because outsiders lack member knowledge and participation in a group's covert culture of "implicit rules" and ineffable sentiments and orientations, their research results are necessarily superficial (1981:15). Merton had asserted that, no matter how talented and careful, the outsider is "excluded" in principle from access to social or cultural truth (Merton 1972:15). He contends that the insider has a privileged monopoly on access to knowledge by virtue of group membership while the outsider has a structurally imposed incapacity to understand "alien groups, statuses, cultures and societies." The outsider has not been socialised in the group, nor been engaged in the experiences "that make up its life, and therefore cannot possess the sensitivity to have empathy and understanding" (1972:15). Only through continued socialisation in the life of the group can one become fully cognisant of its "symbolisms, social realities, meanings of behaviour, feelings and values;" he insists also that "one can only be one to understand one; one must be one in order to understand what is worth understanding" (Merton 1972:17).

Furthermore, Peter Sutton cautions that, "proper attitudes, listening, being nice, and cultural relativism are not enough" (2009:163). He adds that learning to see the world through the eyes of others is exceedingly difficult. Goffman had made a similar point when he wrote: "Everyone knows that when individuals in the presence of others respond to events, their glances, looks, and postural shifts carry all kinds of implication and meaning. When in these settings words are spoken, then tone of voice, manner of uptake, pauses, restarts, similarly qualify" (Goffman 1981:1). The important message is that, for Goffman, these gestures are employed everywhere and constantly, yet rarely were they systematically examined. He makes further comments about listening; notably that in the retelling of events the researcher often gets by with a small amount of allusions and simulations.

According to Goffman, when in listening mode the researcher is most likely to assess, assume and infer when they are dealing with informants. He argues that what is often characterised as communication in interpersonal contexts is, “in actuality, assessment,” and that one’s response to the expressive behaviour of another, “can be based on his assessment of what he believes the other is really thinking rather than what information is transmitted” (1972:15). His next point relates to making assumptions. In the pursuit of gathering information the researcher must deal with and through individuals; some of whom appear to help and others who appear to hinder. Those who manage them must orient themselves to “the capacities that these individuals are seen to have, and the conditions” which have a bearing upon what they do; these include, “innate human propensities, cultural beliefs, social norms and so forth.” He declares that to orient to these capacities is to come to conclusions, “well founded or not, concerning them,” and that “to come to these conclusions is to have assumptions about the fundamental nature of the sorts of persons dealt with. These assumptions are not easy to uncover because they can be deeply taken for granted.” Goffman’s third point is that it is highly important “to realise we do not lead our lives, make decisions or reach our goals in everyday life either statistically or scientifically;” rather, we live by inference. For example: “I am your guest. You do not know, you cannot determine scientifically that I will steal your money or your spoons, but inferentially I will not, and inferentially you have me as a guest” (Goffman 1972:3). In my opinion, these three points are fundamental to contextualising objectivity in research. They are particularly applicable to the outsider because the insider has, as Merton suggests, the benefits of “access to social and cultural truths” (1972: 15)

According to Aguilar, insiders lack culture shock, a stumbling block for the outsider, because insiders have the ability to blend into situations and this makes them less likely to cause disruption to the social setting. Therefore, interaction is much easier, affording them a more thorough rapport with informants. Insider status allows participation in a wider range of Indigenous activities. The insider’s linguistic ability facilitates the design of questions in a way that is more comfortable and meaningful for informants. More importantly,

insiders have a greater ability to read non-verbal cues which may suggest suspicion, embarrassment or confidence, and this ability enables them to adjust their own behaviour in order to gain an effective flow of information. Aguilar notes that critics of insider research claim that “the conduct of research from home inhibits the perception of structures and patterns of social and cultural life... much is too familiar to be noticed, or to arouse the curiosity essential to outsider research.” The outsider enjoys “stranger value.” The outsider is free of commitments to the study group and therefore is more able to be objective. “It is the stranger who finds what is familiar to the group significantly unfamiliar and so is prompted to raise questions for the inquiry less apt to be raised by insiders” (Aguilar 1981:17). Having no axe to grind, the outsider is more readily made privy to secret information and opinions because he or she is a non-interested party who can be trusted not to use the information against the informants and, in any case, has no incentive to do so. On the other hand, the most important criticism levelled at insider research is that it is inherently biased. When insider scholars are biased, this bias is not always positive and it may, in fact, be negative. However, as Aguilar contends, “bias is the human condition” (1981:17) and both insider and outsider researchers are prone to it. Whereas insiders might be guilty of chauvinism by virtue of their primary socialisation in one society, outsiders must make efforts to overcome ethnocentric bias.

Aguilar (1981:23) proposes that the contrasting characteristics of insider and outsider researchers could have value in that they could work together as complementary teams. He says that the emic accounts and etic schemes should be analytically integrated whenever possible for a more thorough understanding of both kinds of the situation. Thus he expresses the opinion that, to some extent, the outsider must get into the informants’ heads, skin or shoes, whereas the insider must get out of his own. Insiders must maintain a necessary degree of distance for the sake of objectivity and outsiders must avoid too much distance lest they be ignorant of what it is they are being objective about. Merton had a similar position, arguing that we should consider the distinctive and interactive roles of the insider and outsider in the process of truth-seeking. He claims there can be “actual intellectual exchange between outsider and insider in which each

adopts perspectives from the other,” and that “insider and outsider perspectives can converge” in spite of differences in the formulation of possible problems (Merton 1972:17).

Scholte suggests that “it is the self-reflexive and self-critical study of anthropological alternatives which can filter out the particular from the general, the idiosyncratic from the universal, or the relative from the essential.” In summary, he argues for a reflexive and critical stance, as a necessary condition for an encompassing anthropology (443). These sentiments are reflected in Michel de Certeau’s call “for a body of theoretical questions, methods, categories and perspectives to make it possible to articulate everyday social practices” (Certeau 1988:xi), and I explore these later in this chapter.

John Aguilar states that insiders are generally not as much inside the cultural and social settings they study as is often implied. Insider researchers are, in many respects, marginal to the majority of their cultural population because, by virtue of their profession, they tend towards the middle class relative to their peers. Ideologically, they are set apart to some extent by their socialisation into the scientific mores of their profession and are likely to be somewhat more acculturated into the larger society (Aguilar 1981:25). Alternately, Peter Sutton cautions “that scholars who seek to study an exotic society begin by entering into a relationship of trust with one particular person who belongs to it. At some point there usually emerges a key person” (2009:163). This access is, therefore, dependent on maintaining a relationship of trust between researcher and this key person who must not seek to mislead. Outsider research is, almost by definition, a humourless pursuit.

Other recent research in the area of ethnography, which shows an increasing recognition of the significance of insider research is discussed below.

Inside Aboriginal Humour

Sutton’s caution is particularly relevant to the study of humour as it flags the difficulties of outsider research when the tactical use of humour is specifically to

“humbug” or “gammon” the outsider. To illustrate, I want to include here some discussion on my son’s anecdotes from his experience in the Northern Territory where he worked and lived in remote Aboriginal communities in the Eastern Arnhem Land region. He marvelled at the ways in which the people engaged in tricks and ruses or games in their everyday encounters with outsiders and with each other. He was fascinated that certain messages could be delivered by eye contact, raising the eyebrows, rolling the eyes, nodding the head or pursing the lips without uttering a word. The use of sign language operated effectively to inform a person who might be at the far end of the village from the sender positioned at the opposite end. Certainly one had to be an insider to be able to read the signs and cues of what was going on.

Another amusing aspect of the practice of everyday life was the “humbugging” Whites, which my son described as an art form. For instance the community people have to endure regular interruptions to their everyday lives from government services people, school teachers, social workers, health workers, tradespeople, sometimes tourists or members of Christian organisations. Some of these people are conscious of doing the right thing in the community but can be over-zealous and make mistakes, such as overt patronising of their clients whose mannerisms, silent cues to each other, nods and the rest indicate to each other, “We’ve heard this all before.” When communicating with these people, the community people are insulted if the Whites speak in faulty Pidgin English/Kriol when they would otherwise prefer plain English.

The “Do Gooders” are easily conned into driving the community people to various locations. Short cuts and direct routes are cleverly avoided by the passengers when giving directions because the trips are usually planned to collect bush material for the making of artefacts or to touch base with kinfolk and friends. Often the silent message that a lift is on spreads like wildfire and before the driver knows it, there is a crowd waiting to pile into the car. Even this is organised, as the person who made the initial request will decide who will travel saying: “No, you have to stay, you got a lift last time.” This ruling is accepted without argument.

The “Do Gooders,” especially those recently from Canberra and in their first remote community, described by my son as “bright eyed and bushy tailed,” love to go bush on bush tucker forays, get their faces painted or have their photographs taken holding a Black baby. It is all very jovial. The local people have not been taken in and are amused that White people get enjoyment out of such activity. They have managed to gain favours from the White people who in return have a warm inner glow from doing good. So it is all innocent reciprocity going on. My son says it is entertaining to watch the community people, “assess how this White person can be useful” (J. Duncan: Pers. comm. 25/4/ 09).

Peter Sutton in commenting on official government visits to an Aboriginal community, points out that these visits were often sandwiched between plane flights on the same day. “Officials visiting remote communities can be seen ‘tippin’ elbow’ (looking at their watches) as the afternoon of their brief transit wears on” (Sutton 209:51). When “tippin’ elbow” is observed it sends a clear message that the concerns of the community have received only token consideration. One can imagine that “tippin’ elbow” would be re-enacted for the entertainment of the community later on.

Another anecdote told to me by my son concerns the drinking of alcohol by some members of the community where he was stationed during the early days of the government intervention in the Northern Territory. It was a dry community, which meant that alcohol was prohibited and strict sanctions were in place to enforce prohibition rules. Those members who wished to imbibe devised cunning ways to avoid transgression and at the same time managed to enjoy their alcoholic sessions. This was done through devious means. For instance the drinkers were free to consume alcohol at the boundary which could be one hundred metres out of town or one hundred kilometres outside Aboriginal land.

What is remarkable here is the sub-culture in operation. Grog or alcohol was hidden along the dirt roads or tracks which ran off the main highway and remained there until the owners were ready to partake of it. A car load of drinkers might also steal someone else’s hidden stash. They would drive slowly along the dirt track looking for fresh footprints and tyre marks which could lead

to hidden alcohol. By the processes of deduction, detection and observation they were able to ascertain whose car made the tyre marks; for instance, it was X's car because his front tyres were "baldy". These skills were put to good use. For example, footprints told them a lot of information, such as where the car stopped and whether this was to hide grog or for a toilet stop. They also studied dust clouds and were ever-watchful. They knew the stashes belonging to prominent community people or those in special kin relationships and these were not robbed. Otherwise it was free-for-all with finders being keepers.

The reverse side of this activity was of course to avoid one's own stash being found and stolen. Some of the ploys in doing this were to climb out of the windows and doors then to jump off the track or dirt road and in that way they did not leave footprints. They would of course park their car many metres away from where they espied fresh signs that a stash was hidden. Not leaving footprints served a dual purpose; they hid their own stash safely from would-be pilferers and they made sure that the owners of the grog which they had stolen would not know they were the culprits (J. Duncan, Pers. Comm. 24/05/09).

Michel de Certeau comments that: "People have to make do with what they have" and, in looking at the resourceful way in which the people in these remote communities get from one place to another and use their skills to subvert the regulations on alcohol or steal another's stash, "we see the tactical and joyful dexterity of the mastery of a technique" (1994:18).

These anecdotes demonstrate the effects of entrenched racism on Aboriginal communities, but they also illustrate the way that Aborigines deal with their powerlessness by using oppositional tactics, tactics which employ a high level of humour. While the distinctive and interactive roles of the inside and outside researcher enable intellectual exchange, and ideally converge, it is the inside researcher who is uniquely positioned to understand and interpret humour as a mode of interaction that operates through the subversion of trust .

Defining Aboriginal Identity

A fundamental difficulty with identifying Aborigines is the hegemonic use of the concept of race. In the past, Indigenous people were often described as belonging to the Aboriginal race. Who, then, are members of the Aboriginal race? Race was defined and policies administered by early administrators on the basis of colour, and this old chestnut has assumed new meaning for Aboriginal people since the 1970s. This is because the more recent policies of self-management and self-determination have required them to identify their Aboriginality before receiving funding for programs, projects and other so-called advantages.

Historically, as Gillian Cowlishaw points out, the dominant group in Australia, “at different periods has offered different identities to Aboriginal people” (1988:87). The different categories used in successive censuses demonstrated differing policies towards Aborigines and accorded different statuses to them. Each change in census category reflected the way Aborigines were perceived to be located in relation to mainstream society. Deirdre Jordan relates how “Legislation also controlled options for identity offered to Aboriginal people” (1988:112). This control was exercised through the Aboriginal Acts of 1917, 1919, and 1922, which remained in force until new legislation in the 1960s, allowed the exemption of some people from categorisation as Aborigines (Jordan 1988:112). This is an important point insofar as those exempted individuals became “honorary Whites,” so they were not just exempt from a stigmatised identity but were also associated with a privileged one through this process.

Peter Hanks and Bryan Keon-Cohen maintain that at the turn of the twentieth century, a genealogical approach to defining Aborigines was adopted. The genealogical distinction appears to have been first introduced by the Aborigines Protection Act of Victoria, 1886. Hanks and Keon-Cohen (1984:24) provide a reason as to why Aborigines were defined according to genealogy on a number of factors, the first of which was the dominant assumption that Aborigines were on their way to extinction; this assumption did not take account of the growing numbers of people of mixed parentage.

The ideas of Social Darwinism encouraged the European invaders to consider that they represented a more highly developed form of civilisation which must displace that of the lower forms of development. This in turn led to a pseudo-biological rationalisation for the dispossession of Aborigines and the assumption that people of mixed descent represented steps or stages of progression towards the European ideal of development. This attitude was used to justify the now universally condemned welfare practice of forcibly removing children from their Aboriginal mothers.

Hanks and Keon-Cohen relate how this genealogical approach to defining Aborigines persisted for sixty years after the 1911 census (1984:30). They argue that a genealogical definition of Aborigines is totally inadequate and insist that Aboriginal identity should be given meaning free of the genealogical constrictions inherent in the 1900 approach. They reinforce their stance by drawing attention to the technical and logical weaknesses of the genealogical approach. At the technical level, the genealogy of an individual is difficult to trace in practice. They point out that given the 200 years of contact between Aborigines and Europeans, a present-day individual may have one of 256 possible racial compositions. They ask: "Over what period and through how many generations?" They add: "Groups of people defined as Aborigines, according to Aboriginal ancestry, would include persons from many different genealogical lines, who belong to genetic populations which are actually diverging and are certainly not closed either demographically or genetically" (1984:32). They conclude that the genealogical approach is racist and arrogant not only because it defines a person's status by their proportion of White blood but mainly because it is a system of classification which ignores the needs and interests of those who are classified by this caste system, and it imposes on Aborigines arbitrary categories designed by Europeans.

To define Aboriginal identity, therefore, means going beyond the genealogical meaning of race. Hanks and Keon-Cohen emphasise that race is a social construct with no biological basis (1984:28), and Deirdre Jordan similarly conceives of race as a social construct. Anne Eckermann claims that race has been used for centuries, as a label "to demarcate groups and establish inferior/superior

relationships between them" (1988:2). Thus, she views race as being used as a symbol to set people apart for different treatment. If one agrees, further, that: "Races are artificial constructs, generated by societies, not biologically determined sub-divisions of humanity" (McConnochie et al. 1988:8), then one can proceed to address the question, but with a focus on Aboriginal identity. The question then is, how can one explain identity? The concept of identity needs to be explained, not just for the purpose of policy implementation, but from an Aboriginal perspective to gain an understanding of what it really means for Aboriginal people.

From a sociological perspective, identity can be defined, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann suggest, in terms of social interaction. They write that "identity is formed by social processes and, once crystallised, is maintained, modified and sometimes reshaped by social relations (1966:194). On the other hand, A.L. Epstein views identity as more than a social category, saying that in our efforts to define it, we must focus on the ways in which identity is generated and transmitted, how it persists, and how it "transforms or disappears, yielding to other forms of identity" (Epstein 1978:45). He looks at the processes which give rise to other forms of identity which in turn become dominant at different times and in different ways. This concept will be understood more clearly when the assimilation policy which sought to change Aborigines is addressed.

Roderick Stirrat explores the relationship between identity and culture and the manner in which they both touch on "the core of self." He argues that there are ways of conceptualising culture which allow for culture and identity to be seen as "two sides of the one coin" (40). Eric Wolf's stance is similar in that he sees cultural changes as affecting identity, and perceives culture as a series of processes that, "construct, reconstruct and dismantle cultural materials, forging cultural identity in the course of these changes" (Wolf 1982:387).

It would seem that Stirrat (1999) is in basic agreement with Epstein (1978) and Wolf (1982) in linking identity to culture, as well as with Berger and Luckmann (1966) who focus upon social relations as forming and maintaining culture. More importantly, Epstein observes that closely-linked to identity is the notion of

autonomy: “The capacity to master one’s environment and to express oneself in ways that have the approval of those immediately close to one” (Epstein 1978:45). He adds that this is crucial in the very early stages of the development of ego-identity; and that scope for autonomous expression remains a basic personality need throughout life. Identity formation then, according to Epstein, is ultimately bound up with the social context within which a person develops and matures. He points out that once a population comes under alien rule, opportunities for the display of autonomy in customary ways may be radically changed. Epstein’s observations will be pertinent when considering Aboriginal identity in later chapters when I discuss how humour was employed to reinforce identity and group solidarity.

According to Epstein, none of us has a single identity. He maintains that we each carry, simultaneously, a range of identities in the same way that each of us has a number of roles and statuses; but while roles and statuses contribute to identity, they do not constitute it. He quotes the sociological view of identity which embraces and integrates a series of roles, status and lesser identities. When Epstein says that identity touches the core of self, he explains that it is also fed by taproots from the unconscious: the more inclusive the identity, the deeper the unconscious roots. “The sense of identity is always, to some degree, a product of the interaction of inner perception and outer response, of forces operating on the individual or the group from within, and those impinging on them from without.” In regard to ethnic identity, Epstein argues that identity relies upon inner concepts of exclusiveness and inner resources; but, at the other extreme, ethnic identity is essentially imposed from without. He stresses the importance of being able to distinguish between “public” and “intimate” culture because there is an assumption that the persistence of custom holds the key to the persistence of identity. He also advises us to take account of the “external and internal, the objective and the subjective, the sociological and psychological elements,” which are always present in the formation of identity (Epstein 1978:111).

Having considered definitions of race and identity, the task of defining Aborigines becomes clearer. Howard Creamer suggests that Aboriginal identity can be explained by using an anthropological perspective based on the role of

individual knowledge in constructing social systems. Because cultural knowledge is an important factor for establishing a person's position within the community, he sees cultural revival as a motivating force in providing a vital and dynamic process for constructing the recent reality of Aboriginal identity (Creamer 1988:49).

Political changes since the 1970s have led to challenges to the genealogical approach to Aboriginal identity. These challenges are based on the principle that Aboriginal identity can only be determined by Aboriginal people themselves and that it must encompass all Aborigines throughout Australia. Cowlshaw, in reinforcing the view that culture, in the wider sense, is a creative response to the conditions of existence experienced by a group, maintains that all Aborigines possess and share a culture as much as any other group. Hence they have the right to determine and to promulgate their own distinctive Aboriginal identity (Cowlshaw 1988: 89). The conventional definition of Aboriginal identity espoused by Hanks and Keon-Cohen is: "A person of Aboriginal descent, albeit mixed, who identifies as such and who is recognised by the Aboriginal community as an Aboriginal" (1984:31).

The history of my own family is relevant here because, in spite of these challenges, our members are still the result of many genealogical lines. For instance, on my mother's side her grandfathers were White and her grandmothers were deemed "half-castes," so my mother and her siblings were classified as "quarter-castes." They had a reasonable education and were able to occupy the lowest level of the Australian social ladder, after the low class Whites. However, they were never completely accepted and were always reminded of their status. My aunts married White men and, with the dilution of Aboriginal blood occurring with each generation, the result today is that my cousins and their families, particularly their grandchildren, all identify as White according to the arbitrary category imposed by Europeans. To do this, they had to deny their Aboriginal roots and disown their kinship with us by "passing." On my father's side there is also an admixture of genealogical lines; namely Aboriginal, English, Scottish and Indian. My siblings and I were classed as Aborigines because of the darker pigment of our skin, and we always identified as such. The colour bar was

a barrier of colour prejudice and discrimination which separated light-skinned Aborigines from their dark-skinned relatives. This was akin to the policy of assimilation which also fractured family groups.

The Colour Barrier in Australia

No discussion of racism in Australia would be complete if one overlooked the caste barrier, racism in action. In *Politics of Suffering*, Peter Sutton refers to the caste barrier and its effects on Aborigines and the part it played in continuing racial discrimination: "Discrimination was then more often known as the caste barrier or in more common talk, the colour bar" (2009:44). He adds that it was one of the multiple causes of Aboriginal disadvantage. While the caste system is perhaps most popularly associated with the Hindu social system of India, the caste barrier as it operated in Australia is distinctly different. In India, belonging to a certain caste means one belongs to an endogamous and hereditary social group in which Hindus are rigidly separated. The caste system in Australia identified one according to the proportion of Aboriginal blood that one inherited. My mother and her siblings were identified as quarter castes whereas her grandmother was a half caste. Nowadays the terms half caste, quarter caste and even full blood are anathema to Aborigines. The importance of this facet of racism will be made clear in the chapters that follow. They examine the way in which Aborigines deal with their powerlessness by using oppositional tactics against the caste barrier, tactics which employ a high level of humour.

I remember my mother, aunts and uncles calling the caste barrier the colour bar. If someone in the family were refused service, the reaction would be: "So they drew the colour line against you," or "You came up against the colour bar." I grew up understanding this phenomenon as the colour bar and will refer to it as this. So, the colour bar needs to be explained, and how it became widespread throughout Australia also requires further clarification.

The colour bar, based on the shades of pigment in the skin, operated in most spheres of Aboriginal life. During the early years of the twentieth century, many southern Aborigines like their northern counterparts, experienced

powerlessness and lack of autonomy. But control of Aborigines in the south was achieved less through institutionalisation and more through a barrier of colour prejudice and discrimination which separated light-skinned from dark-skinned and made them outcasts. By 1923 most southern Aborigines were mainly fringe-dwellers in country towns, while a few lived in towns or on reserves. Those who lived on reserves were under reserve controls and conditions. Wherever they lived, however, they were controlled by a colour bar which created two worlds in country towns — one White and the other Black. Sometimes it was officially sanctioned by, for example, selective access to council swimming pools, schools and hotels. But more pervasive were the unofficial barriers against Aborigines, where churches, community organisations and clubs discouraged Aboriginal participation. Local councils blocked their movement into housing in town; service providers such as hairdressers and shopkeepers refused to serve Aborigines in case their White clients were offended. Aborigines were excluded from employment except in lowly-paid jobs and seasonal work. The police hounded Aborigines mercilessly wherever they went. Once my brother Peter was arrested in a neighbouring township and accused of stealing harness and other stock equipment from a man in his hometown. Fortunately, he was able to provide proof by showing receipts that he had bought the stuff. By the same token, whenever any crime, petty or otherwise, was reported to the police, they made Peter their first port of call. This police harassment was a regular disruption to the peace of mind that he desired, and it is small wonder that he took solace and comfort in alcoholic sessions with his fellow Aboriginal sufferers. They were subject to a curfew, had to leave town before dark, and were often apprehended on flimsy charges. I know first-hand that my father and my uncles were gaoled overnight for being in town after dark. These events would not have happened if my brother, father and uncles were White. Being White meant that one had certain rights and privileges, valuable assets denied to Aborigines in those days.

In some towns the colour bar was not total, depending on the specific town or the individual. Some shopkeepers sold goods to Aborigines but served them last. Some cafés sold them food but they could not eat it on the premises; they were

allowed into picture theatres but often had to sit in the roped-off area down the front. Unofficial apartheid did exist in this country. Aborigines were separated from Whites, not because they were poor but because they were Aborigines. This segregation and discrimination had an enormous impact on their lives: "At the deepest level it gnawed away at the Aboriginal psyche" (Broome 1982:145).

Prejudice affected Aborigines in more tangible ways because it established a cycle of poverty that ensnared Aboriginal people. As is often the case with the disadvantaged, Aborigines who were victims of forces beyond their control were blamed for their poverty. But the actual causes were White racism and discrimination which led to poor education, lowly-paid jobs, poor housing and ill-health. It is with great sadness that I recall how my mother strove hard to improve our living conditions and her bitter disappointment when she was denied access to a little cottage closer to town. At first the owner of the property agreed to her request, but, when he went home that night and told his wife and mother-in-law, they forced him to withdraw his consent. This was a blow for all of us, that hopes of improving our lot were crushed by two racist women. As Richard Broome suggests: "despite the fact that racism is illogical, scientifically invalid and unethical, it came to dominate the thinking of most Australians by 1900 and beyond" (1982:88).

Group Identity

The assimilation policy of the 1950s and 1960s, as explained by J.H. Bell (1964), meant that Aborigines were expected to eventually attain the same customs, hopes, beliefs and loyalties as White Australians. Some individuals who were caught up in a cycle of poverty and despair chose to become or to pass as European to escape the poverty and stigma of the colour bar; just as some of my family members tried to pass as White. However, in many cases these attempts to escape their Aboriginality led to further alienation and self-destruction, simply because they no longer belonged to a group. Their efforts to become White were often spurned by the White majority; and their predicament would have been noticed by other Aborigines.

This implied that they had to acquire a certain status, with a different set of cultural and behavioural expectations. From the 1970s through the 1980s, ironically, government ideas concerning self-determination and self-management for Aboriginal people pushed them back towards identification with their own people (Cowlshaw 1988:111). Deirdre Jordan comments on the old ways by which Aborigines reinforced their sense of identity, for example, memories of old people, anthropological writings, archaeological remains and documentary records. She writes that in those parts of Australia which were colonised early, Aboriginal cultural identity was forged historically in rural communities on the fringes of country towns, and it is to these communities that most Aboriginal political leaders return because this is where they were nurtured. She points out that: "An Aboriginal representative's legitimacy depends to some extent on the relationship with such communities" (Jordan 1988: 115).

Jordan adds that the sense of a connection to the remote past contributes to positive Aboriginal identity. Although much of the "high" or traditional culture disappeared during the years of destruction and European management, some aspects of culture did survive, especially in more isolated areas. Here kinship ties, belief in spirits, some knowledge of totems, sacred sites and traditional remedies were in evidence during the segregation and assimilation years. I can testify firsthand that fragments of Aboriginal culture did continue to survive. At this point I would like to talk about my Aunt Min who fostered my siblings and me while our mother had to work as a live-in domestic in another town. She was a remarkable woman, not only for her homemaking and nurturing skills but for her ability to be in tune with the supernatural. She claimed she saw and heard spirits. She believed that these apparitions were bearers of bad news or warnings to be on guard against unwelcome happenings. She had an unshakeable belief in the death bird which she called the Jowambi. I actually heard this bird when I was a child and it was a chilling experience. If it called close by, we would hear straightaway about a death of a close relative, but if it called as it was flying over and its call tapered off, that signified that we would hear later about a death. As far as I can recall it was never wrong.

My brother Peter, the last born in our family, was a very delicate baby and Aunt Min had many anxious times when trying to rear him. But she was a good nurturer and nursed him through many bouts of double pneumonia. She always knew when Peter's life was in danger, because, she claimed, the spirits warned her. These warnings came in various ways including being suddenly awakened by a touch or the calling of her name, a feeling of another presence in the room, a low whistle like her Grandmother used to make, a loud knocking on the door, pebbles suddenly thrown on the roof, or she would actually see an apparition, usually her mother. These events happened at night and she would immediately go to Peter and touch his brow. He would be "burning like fire" with a raging fever and a high temperature. We never questioned her about these experiences because not for one moment did we disbelieve her. There seemed to be tacit agreement that we never talked about these happenings with White people but they were always topics of conversation for us to be shared only within the group. In retrospect we were very exclusive in relation to our folklore.

Aboriginal group solidarity against Europeans was also based on a common history of injustice which, to the people, was as real as if it were yesterday. As mentioned earlier, in the 1940s old people were still alive who, as children, could remember massacres; and thus, as Broome remarks, there emerged "a folk history of bad times (but also of good)" that gave the numerous Aboriginal groups a strong sense of common purpose and a determination to defy European Australians. "Not only their past, but also their ongoing existence, as a rejected minority, reinforced Aboriginal group identity" (Broome 1982:155).

Many Aborigines succeeded in opposing the colour bar. Their response to it was not alienation and despair but defiance and maintenance of Aboriginal group solidarity. Broome records that Aboriginal defiance was as common a response as despair and by the 1980s it had become the stronger of the two responses. He states that, "Aboriginal resistance was rooted in three things: namely, the continuance of some Aboriginal culture; a sense of injustice among Aborigines; and the creation of a strong group identity among Aborigines, due to their common predicament" (Broome 1982:154).

It became vital for Aboriginal people to maintain loyalty to the local group where, generally, they were connected by kinship; and where there was a high degree of conformity to the values of mutual aid and sharing, values which were very strong. In the past, Aborigines have had their identity defined for them by Whites or by government policy. This has now changed and they have the right to determine and to promote their own distinctive identity. In the past, group solidarity played a major role in strengthening their identity, and today their resilience and tenacity to survive is a source of amazement, deserving of the highest commendation.

Since my siblings and I identified as Aborigines and were known in the community from which we came, I was able to obtain proof of identity for my son and granddaughter. Even though we are integrated into the urban community where we reside and have little contact with my community since I left at the age of sixteen, we have legitimacy (especially my son and his daughter) to identify as Aborigines.

This thesis draws on autobiographical accounts from my family and working experience to illustrate how Aboriginal humour shapes meanings of everyday life in Australia. These accounts show how humour is used to negotiate the ethical issues endemic to embodied race relations in Australia. As Katrina Schlunke argues:

Autobiographies of events create the possibility of an ethical embodied relationship with the past, not a final story. It is in displaying the relationship between 'selves', time and writer/reader that we assemble the possibilities of the past in the present, and make a space where the past is a becoming now ... when we look carefully at the stories from the past, some of which are called 'official history' and some of which are called gossip, we see that all stories are personal, while showing that all writing is personal. (2005:14–15)

Schlunke suggests that family histories provide an alternative way of locating relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. These histories move beyond the gaze of cultural tourism on particular locations to encompass the complexity of lived relationships. She writes "Family histories invent a particularly located person who becomes the 'local', who, in turn,

immediately brings to life the immediate location ... it is also a term that denotes a living relationship with that place" (43). Humour in my family histories has been central to the communication of our experience over different generations as "locals" with specific living relationships to Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and authorities.

Over time, group solidarity has prevailed against the powerful forces working against it. In the ensuing chapters it will be shown that humour has played a significant part, in a variety of ways, in achieving this.

The Impact of the Missionaries: A Self-Reflexive Approach

Learning to see the world through the eyes of others ideally means not just looking through a different lens, but stepping through it as far as feasible. Without a personal connection this is mountaineously [sic] difficult. (Sutton 2009:163)

If racism in Australia was particularly explicit in government policies and anthropological practices which defined Aboriginality through genealogical issues, the impact of missionaries was less well known. I had firsthand experience with Anglican missions during the early 1950s. As a young teacher sponsored by the Anglican Church, my first teaching assignment was to the school at Yarrabah, an Aboriginal mission near Cairns in North Queensland.

Christian missionary intrusion went hand in hand with the government policies and practices outlined earlier. Although it is common knowledge that the European conquest of this country resulted in the dispossession of Indigenous people of their land, forcing many of them to the fringes of colonial society, not so well known is the extent to which missionaries also played a part in the destruction of their culture, social structure and way of life. The missionaries imposed their terms upon and modified the way of life of the Indigenous people. Broome (1982) and Rosalind Kidd (1987) record graphic descriptions of the inhuman treatment of them by some missionaries in those early days. Bain Attwood observes: "Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many indigenes faced a second onslaught from agents of European civilisation who sought to change and reshape their hearts and minds, making them anew" (Attwood 1989:1).

While this could be perceived by others as a peaceful process, Attwood deplores it as being “as far-reaching in impact as the earlier, more violent invasion” (1989:1). Another way of looking at it is that the religion, exploitation and violence worked together as an ideology of Whiteness essentially driven by possession. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson comments “As an attribute of patriarchal white sovereignty, virtue functions as a useable property to dispossess Indigenous peoples from the ground of moral value” (2011:644). That is, White Europeans behaved as rightful owners of the lands and souls of those others on whose territory and sovereignty they encroached.

Although Broome highlights many of the failings of missionaries, he also acknowledges that there were mixed missionary blessings. In particular, many Aborigines were saved from the ravages of diseases and annihilation at the hands of the more rapacious of Europeans. “The isolation of the missions also provided a breathing space in which Aborigines were able to face change more slowly” (Broome 1982:119), and another heartening element of the missionary intrusion was that a number of them saw the value of Aboriginal culture and were able to preserve many of its aspects.

Attwood, however, exposes the efforts of missionaries, citing the missionaries’ own belief in their cultural superiority, and their assumption that they had the right to “civilise, regulate and control Aboriginal people” (Attwood 1989:1) This, in his opinion, amounted to violence.

Markus expresses similar sentiments, noting that the sense of superiority which most missionaries felt had its basis in the racist beliefs of the time. They regarded Aborigines as backward children unable to fend for themselves. They not only attacked the languages of Aborigines, they also attacked their customs and beliefs and deliberately set out to mock and, hence, undermine, traditional culture (Markus 1990:74). Broome also notes that the “Reverend E.R. Gribble, an Anglican missionary, all of his life typically described the Aborigines as ‘children’ who belonged to a ‘degraded and depraved race’ which must be uplifted” (Broome 1982:104).

I was a young teacher sponsored by the Anglican Church, and my first teaching assignment was to the school at Yarrabah, an Aboriginal mission near Cairns. I observed many practices of the mission management which even then, at the height of my naivety and immaturity, I thought unjust. The system, however, made me helpless to speak out. Permission had to be granted by the Superintendent for ordinary, everyday pursuits I took for granted, not having lived under mission control. These included withdrawing money from personal bank accounts which was in fact wages for outside seasonal employment such as cane cutting, or meeting in Cairns with family members living off the mission. There was also compulsory dormitory residence at a very early age for girls. The boys' dormitory was mysteriously burnt to the ground prior to my arrival.

To support my observations, I quote Albert Holt's *Forcibly Removed*, when he writes about living on a reserve:

The government restricted our freedom with a permit system. They had absolute control over us. Written permission had to be sought from the office and a permit obtained for anybody going from the mission. Any hunting or fishing trips had to have permission from the office clerk. Any breach of the permit time frame was seen as defying authority and was a serious offence resulting in a criminal conviction, with a jail sentence of up to ninety days. The conditions enforced on our people were so unjust that we all lived in fear that at any time anyone of us could be taken off to jail. It was scary. People could be jailed just on allegations. There was no escaping this. If the need arose for us to visit Murgon, even for business, we'd have to see the clerk at the office who treated our requests with sarcasm and sadistic humour. He knew the only way for us to travel was on foot ... he would make out a permit for what he considered an acceptable time ... not only the police but any citizen could challenge the validity of the permit and outstaying the time limit was a jailable offence (Holt 2001:15).

Holt informs us that it was "a humiliating experience to walk the streets of Murgon" as a Murrie. Instead of walking proudly, he and his fellow Aborigines felt "like mongrel dogs being driven into hiding with our tails between our legs." But Holt can still find humour in his situation. Despite having to endure privation and the lack of basic human rights, he can still smile as found in this statement: "Segregation meant toilet facilities were out of bounds. Toilets were signposted 'Not for the convenience of Natives.' It was this rule that led to a lot of trees dying within the township. Some would have been fertilised with goona (faeces)

another jailable offence" (Holt 2001:16).

My worst experience was of course in the school where I suffered the loss of dignity, not only for myself but for the children and the village teaching assistants. The Bishop in his wisdom appointed a retired White teacher as head mistress who I will refer to as Miss P. This lady had spent all her teaching life in exclusive schools for girls. At the end of her career, afflicted with Parkinson's Disease and knowing nothing about Aboriginal culture, she was thought fit to take on the delicate task of educating very shy and vulnerable mission children to whom she often referred as animals, and their behaviour as "animal behaviour." She was scornful of the wailing and public display of grief by the people at funerals and again, referred to this as "animal behaviour." Once, when it was noticed that there was less wailing at a funeral, she declared to all that at last the Aborigines were learning to be civilised.

I am reminded of Yarrabah by Margaret Craven who, in *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, wrote about an American Indian reserve also under the control of the Anglican Church. She records this:

Once there was an agent who said there was no use educating the Indian because if you did, you'd have to find him a job, and he was bound to die off anyway. And once the church sent a man to Kingcome who had never worked out well anywhere because it was sure he could do no harm. All were wrong and the village survived them. (Craven 1967:12)

I can certainly vouch that there were one or two such misfits at Yarrabah who were unable to succeed in their own White world and inevitably failed in their mission to the Aborigines of Yarrabah. For example, apart from Miss P there was a male missionary, a paedophile who sexually abused several young boys over a three-year period. The abuse occurred after his Sunday School Class when he detained his victims to help pack away class material. He was banished from Yarrabah but the church covered up his crimes and, within a seemingly short time, he was ordained as a priest by the Anglican archbishop at that time. Another male misfit was in charge of the workshop where the Aboriginal men were taught building and plumbing skills among other manual arts. He was sent to Cairns by the superintendent to purchase certain items of equipment. He returned with more money than he was given and only half of the items on his

shopping list. This is but one example of his bumbling career as an instructor in the mission workshop. In the females' staff room, I had to endure the bickering between Miss P and Miss O who worked in the mission office. Miss P was jealous of Miss O's higher university degree and the fact that she was a graduate of Girton College in England. These verbal duels happened at breakfast on a regular basis. When Miss O had had enough, she simply turned off her hearing aid. Their bickering was a welcome relief for me because Miss P's attention was not on me. Her second pastime at breakfast was to give a running account of my failures and deficiencies to all who would listen. She did this in my presence as if I were invisible. Although I could not articulate my feelings then, in retrospect I am able to relate to the sentiments of Robert C. Young in relation to: "What it is really like to be from a minority, to live as the person who is always in the margins, to be the person who never qualifies as the norm, the person who is not authorised to speak" (Young 2003:1).

In contrast to Yarrabah, however, I had a different experience when I was appointed to a school in the Torres Strait. I spent three years on Moa Island at Saint Paul's Anglican Mission School. There were mixed missionary blessings such as Broome (1982:87) points out in his work. To begin with, the Islanders had much more control over matters affecting their lives, showing a sturdy independence free of missionary interference. The missionaries adapted some Island customs in Christian rites. For example, during burials the mourners were allowed their traditional wailing and the "stone opening" ceremonies which, I observed, really marked the end of mourning, were now used as occasions to celebrate the completion of headstones and were given Christian blessing. Island language hymns were sung at most church services and I had the feeling that the people were comfortable with Christian worship.

I had a free hand in the school and, even then, I saw the necessity for making the lessons relevant as opposed to those of the rigid Queensland state school system of the time. For instance, I tried to introduce reading materials featuring familiar topics, such as fish, turtles, dugong, pearl shell and trochus shell. The Queensland Readers focused upon stories about ancient English history and morbid accounts of people perishing in snowstorms.

I used shells, berries, seeds etc. to teach counting and number concepts. I encouraged the children to communicate with me in Kriol, and I benefited immensely in that I learned a lot about them and their folk-lore because they were able to open out in expressing themselves. I attribute my ability to empathise with, and to be accepted by, the people of Saint Paul's Mission to not being integrated into the racist ideology of Whiteness, being outside the structures so admired by Miss O and Miss P. Apart from this, I had the benefit of a twelve-month crash course in Anthropology which I undertook at Sydney University prior to going to the Torres Strait.

Broome explains that "racism occurs where two groups see themselves as physically and racially (as opposed to just culturally) different, and when one group claims the alleged inferiority of the other group is *caused* by the innate physical differences of its members." The end result is that "one group seeks to dominate and exploit the other through invasion, economic control or slavery. In recent times racism has been closely linked to European colonial expansion," (Broome 1982:87). Australia is one example. Gail Bederman wrote in 1996: "Systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism and racism actively coerce Black folks to internalise negative perceptions of blackness" (166). It is easy to understand how Aborigines were disempowered.

Ethnocentrism or belief in one's own culture is not necessarily destructive, as it is desirable for people to collect together in groups for mutual survival, shelter and protection; benefits which demand group loyalty and a commitment to one's customs and culture. It is destructive when such attitudes and beliefs evolve into racism. Racist beliefs can lead the dominant group into disempowerment of a minority group, especially when governments employ institutional racism as has occurred in Australia. Then the dominant group can become extremely powerful in shaping human lives.

The impact of White settlement led to the disempowerment of Aborigines when the whole fabric of their understanding of life and their ability to be themselves was grossly destabilised. This impact brought about a crisis of identity for many. By the 1940s, most Aborigines wherever they lived were controlled by a colour

bar which separated light-skinned Aborigines from their dark-skinned relatives. This was akin to the policy of assimilation which also fractured family groups. They very quickly became a people without autonomy, according to White opinion, belonging to a worthless culture. A strong sense of identity, knowing who we are, gives us autonomy and scope for autonomous expression and remains a basic personality need throughout life. Ultimately, the social context within which a person develops and matures is fundamental to a sense of identity. When the Aboriginal population came under alien rule, opportunities for the expression of autonomy in customary ways were radically changed.

As if the loss of their lands and spiritual wellbeing were not enough, racism, enshrined in government policies and entrenched in the minds of the White culture, contributed towards the destruction of Aboriginal society. The impact of government policies severely eroded Aboriginal culture which in turn led to a crisis of identity, since culture and identity are “two sides of the one coin” as espoused by Epstein. The overriding factor in European dealings with Aborigines was a racism which dominated the thinking of most White Australians for the greater part of the last two hundred years of their presence in this country.

One of the three main reasons for the strength of racism, Broome identifies, is the Usurper Complex, a theory put forward by Albert Memmi in 1965, which explains the settlers’ need to rationalise the dispossession of the way of life and the land belonging to the Indigenous people (Broome 1982:91). Another point Broome could have made is in relation to “Whiteness ideology which grew from the experience of dominating rather than from biology or culture.” Whiteness has long found expression in African American thought; for example, Malcolm X and Amiri Baraka “insisted that Whiteness was not colour but rather an ideology that developed out of the desires to rule and the exigencies of ruling” (Paul Carter 2004:14).

Border Crossing: The Inside Researcher and Aboriginal Humour

In an article in 2000, "Anthropology Goes Inside: The New Educational Ethnology of Ethnicity and Gender," Douglas Foley, Bradley Levinson and Janise Hurtig asserted that insider ethnographers are among the most important to have arrived on the intellectual scene and that their growing impact as researchers is a validation of the point that insider knowledge is valuable. Of particular interest to me is their argument that insider ethnographers have become a type of "border crosser" in that they "construct insider knowledge using tools of the academy." They also state that "insider contributors are crucial in bringing to light the dynamics of culture that may lead to greater understanding and comprehension of beliefs" (Foley, Levison and Hurtig 2000:37).

Aileen Moreton-Robinson, an Indigenous academic whose research involves studies and publications in relation to "Whiteness" in Australia, claims to have employed an epistemological standpoint in her research. She identifies this as "epistemological privilege." In clarifying this term she says: "We have more direct access to knowledges about our subordination." Moreton-Robinson adds: "This privileged standpoint is tied to and circumscribed by my training in anthropology, sociology and feminism. My accountability in academia is also shaped by these disciplinary knowledges, which means I conform to certain procedures and protocols of academic research" (2003:73). So, mindful of Moreton-Robinson's deliberation that "the relation of Indigenous scholars to empirical research cannot be understood without reference to the historical factors that have shaped our current social, economic and political situation" (73), it is my aim also to conduct this study with as much impartiality as possible despite my epistemological "race privilege," but I do argue also that my role as "border crosser" adds strength to the position I take as an insider.

Michel de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) asks for a continuing investigation of the ways in which "users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate". The goal would be achieved if "everyday practices, ways of operating ... no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity," but "a body of theoretical questions, methods,

categories and perspectives, by penetrating this obscurity, make it possible to articulate them” (Certeau 1988:xi). For instance, the use of humour by Aborigines is a practice central to their daily social life. However, it is often obscured in the background of social activity, assumed to be passive when, in actuality, in the practice of everyday life it is an active dynamic. This perception will become apparent in successive chapters.

It is important to bear in mind Certeau’s argument that a culture is like law in that it “articulates conflicts and alternately legitimises, displaces or controls the superior force.” He continues that culture develops an atmosphere of tensions, sometimes even violence, but it provides “symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromise, all more or less temporary” (1988:xvii). In other words, he is saying that cultures are not static; on the contrary, they are in a constant state of dynamism. He states that the tactics and ingenious ways through which the weak make use of the strong lend a political dimension to everyday practices. This is demonstrated in the way Aborigines have employed the strategies of the dominant society in education, drama and art. They have done this with a great deal of humour, and this will be addressed in following chapters of this thesis.

In *Outline of the Theory of Practice* (1977), Pierre Bourdieu explains that the relationship between the informant and the anthropologist is “somewhat analogous to a pedagogical relationship, in which the master must bring to the state of explicitness for the purpose of transmission, the unconscious schemes of his practice;” in addition to this, the anthropologist draws upon a highly “ambiguous vocabulary of rules, grammar, morality and law to express a social practice that in fact obeys quite different principles” (1977:18). Bourdieu argues against the style of anthropology that is guided by (what he calls) “the fallacy of the rule.” He criticises the notion that the anthropologist as an outsider can have a rich understanding of the way a culture works merely through an understanding of its formal rules; rules regarding, for example, hierarchies, power structures, marriage, taboos or ritual. He argues that, while rules may reflect what informants tell the anthropologist about the ways their society is structured, they tell little about the actual way in which they operate in everyday

life. He emphasises that the notion that the rule dominates in anthropological or linguistic theory “cannot be fully understood unless it is seen that this notion provides a solution to the contradictions and difficulties to which the researcher is condemned by an inadequate... or an implicit theory of practice” (Bourdieu 1977:22).

Bourdieu was not alone in his opinion. M.L. Apte in 1985 claimed that humour had not been investigated as closely as the institution of marriage, political institutions, language, kinship, religion and the rest, but had rather been studied in a “topical fashion.” By that he means anthropologists have included the topic of humour within institutionalised joking, kinship, social relations, religious rituals, and in linguistics; such as banter, riddles, and insults (1985:194). Similarly Mulkay in 1988 bemoans the lack of general studies of humour in anthropology, noting that the systemic and thorough analysis of the nature of humour in the context of individual cultures is absent but, on the other hand, anthropological studies in ritual humour are extensive and diverse (Mulkay 1988:74).

Inasmuch as anthropological studies might tell us about the rules of social structures and religion, we are not told about the way the “game” is played in everyday interactions in which humour often signals a potential or actual transgression of the rules. This is particularly marked in “carnival” events and I discuss these in more detail in Chapter three where I address seditious and festive laughter. Bourdieu proclaims that it is necessary to understand the practical knowledge that participants in a culture bring to bear. A lot of has to do with timing and context so it is quite applicable to the way humour works in practice. For instance, we can know the way that humour crosses boundaries, challenges hierarchies or makes painful or embarrassing experiences bearable, but to understand why a given incident or utterance is actually funny, there is a whole lot more we need to understand. It is this contextual information about Aboriginal humour as a cultural practice involving practical knowledge or cultural capital that I endeavour to bring to this thesis.

Bourdieu points out that in social formations where no “judicial apparatus” exists and where the social group functions as simple “arbitration tribunals” which are more or less family councils, “the rules of customary law have some practical efficacy only to the extent that skilfully manipulated by the holders of authority ... they awaken ... the dispositions of the habitus” (Bourdieu 1977:17). This introduces further discussion on his concept of *habitus* as it relates to my insider research which I discuss in a following section. *Habitus* is defined as: “A system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment ... as well as organising principles of actions. In other words, habitus names cultural categories through which individuals process the world and make decisions about what to do” (Bourdieu in Leitch 2001:1813). Thus, *habitus* denotes dispositions that shape fundamental habits and skills which “transmit social power” to a person. So it contains both skills and power. Similarly cultural capital is the sum of meaningful cultural resources at the individual’s disposal. Like Bourdieu himself, initially from a lower class background, my *habitus* could be seen as to some extent divided, but my Indigeneity as also providing specific advantages for academic research.

In the present research, my insider methodology draws on the life experiences of my own extended family, which represent in microcosm the life situations of Aboriginal people. My research as an Aboriginal insider bridges the positions of insider and outsider, is openly reflexive and has the added perspective of the mainstream skills of the professional researcher. While library research and review provide the tools of inquiry for the review of written scholarship, this project was discussed with a number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people including anthropologists, other academics and community workers. The Indigenous Resource Centre at Inala was accessed for books, plays and videos by Aboriginal authors, or those featuring Aboriginal issues. The first strategy was recording a variety of jokes and humorous anecdotes from a broad sample of people, including Aborigines, anthropologists, teachers, service providers and others who in one way or another have observed Aboriginal humour in action. The Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts Centre was accessed for a participant observation exercise where as an observer, I attended stage

rehearsal, opening nights and discussion groups. Interviews were conducted with Aboriginal actors and comics such as Ningali Lawson and cast members from the Indigenous Performing Arts Centre. Interviews were conducted by telephone with Mark Bin Bakar (Mary G), Stephen Baamba Albert and Bain Stewart. I have been a participant in and an observer of Aboriginal humour throughout my life's journey. I also bring to this research the "epistemological privilege" of the mainstream scholarly researcher. As "border crosser," I interpret Aboriginal humour not only within what Bourdieu calls "the fallacy of the rule" (Bourdieu 1977:22), but as a culturally-specific style of traditional, or modified bush humour, a means of coping with the situation in White Australia.

CHAPTER 2: HUMOUR AS A WEAPON OF THE WEAK

This chapter evaluates commentaries on, and critical/theoretical discussions of the literature on humour as a branch of the broader debate on emotion in order to demonstrate how these perspectives can be applied to power relations within and between groups of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In the first part of the chapter I examine writing on humour, and in the second part will focus on humour as a “weapon of the weak” making some comparisons with other cultures in which marginalised groups have used humour as a means of challenging and coping with oppression and racism from the dominant group in the society in which they lived.

I argue that Aboriginal humour has distinctive features, compared with other identifiable modes of humour. Indeed, Aboriginal people, in cross-cultural settings of urban Australia, have adapted a culturally-specific style of traditional bush humour – one that White contact and control has significantly affected in its expression and application. The mostly anthropological studies of Aboriginal humour to date have considered humour as social control, and a means of regulation within Aboriginal communities. In this thesis, by using the inside researcher approach, I expand upon this to consider humour as a mode for interacting with the White Australian community, and as a strategy for coping with disempowerment under White rule and cultural dominance up until the present.

The Theory and Elements of Emotion

We all know from experience, when it comes to shaping our decisions and our actions, feelings count every bit as much and often more than thought. We have gone too far in emphasising the value and import of the purely rational in human life. Intelligence can come to nothing when emotions hold sway. (Goleman 1995:289)

The term emotion is derived from the Latin *et movere*, meaning to migrate or transfer from one place to another. James Averill notes that for approximately 2000 years, from the ancient Greeks to the middle of the eighteenth century, “it was common to speak of the emotions as passions.” It was also thought that

emotions were something that happened to us (passions) not something we deliberately do “(actions)” (Averill 1980:37). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines emotion as: “Originally: an agitation of mind; an excited mental state. Subsequently: any strong mental or instinctive feeling, as pleasure, grief, hope, fear, etc., deriving esp. from one’s circumstances, mood, or relationship with others.” Claire Armon-Jones (1986:32) has pointed out that while, historically, there was a tendency to define emotions as biologically primitive, or instinctive responses to happenings in everyday life, theories of emotion have emerged since the 1970s which dispute this view. Such theorisations (found in philosophy, psychology and anthropology) retain the standard use of emotion to cover phenomena such as fear, anger, sorrow, joy, compassion, grief, remorse, envy, jealousy, guilt, pity, gratitude and other affective states, but “expand this to a feeling and its distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological states, and a range of propensities to act.” Therefore, all emotions can be seen, basically, as impulses to act, and each emotion plays a unique role, as revealed by its distinctive biological signature. “These biological propensities to act are shaped further by our life experiences and our culture” (Goleman 1995:6).

Robert Solomon argues that emotions are rational and purposive rather than irrational and disruptive, and are like actions, insofar as we choose an emotion much as we choose a course of action. Emotions are intentional, as in when one says, for example, “I am angry at John for stealing my car” (Solomon 1980:251). Errol Bedford concluded that concepts to do with emotion are not purely physiological, but that they “presuppose concepts of social relationships and institutions and concepts belonging to systems of judgements – moral, aesthetic and legal.” He adds that by using emotion words, we are able to relate behaviour to the complex background in which it is enacted, and so are able to make human actions more intelligible (Bedford 1986:30). Averill appears to share a similar line of thought when he states that emotions are social constructions; responses that have been institutionalised as a means of confronting and resolving conflicts existing within a social system. One of the basic arguments he puts forward is that, no matter how widespread the assumption that emotions are biologically primitive, most standard emotional reactions are socially constructed or

institutionalised patterns of response. He concludes that: “for a response to become institutionalised it must serve some social function” (Averill 1980:43).

Anna Wierzbicka, in 1994, suggests that “emotion and culture are inextricably intertwined so that cultures evolve different attitudes toward feelings, and different communication strategies associated with feelings” (Wierzbicka 1994: 189). Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama (1994: 91) contend that a cultural group’s habitual and normative social behaviour and associated emotions, will, in turn, influence behaviour within the group, recalling the notion of “habitus”. However, the way in which these emotions are expressed reflect rules compatible with culture, and to understand how emotions are expressed one has to understand culture. Paul Ekman sees emotions as complex, entailing a number of different response systems. Emotions tend to elicit emotional reactions in others, but most involve aspects that are culturally specific (Ekman 1994:80). “Emotional lives are profoundly influenced by the culture to which they belong.” Similarities exist across cultures, but differences also exist because cultures “differ in their beliefs about the meaning of emotional experiences, expressions and behaviours” (Ellsworth 1994:23).

These notions of emotion as “socio-culturally constituted,” can be united as the theory of Constructionism. Constructionists hold the view that attitudes about emotion are culturally determined; in other words, they are learnt as part of the person’s beliefs, norms and expectations of his or her culture. According to Armon-Jones: “Emotions are statements about, and motivations for the enactment of cultural values” (Armon-Jones 1986:32). Constructionists see a basic relationship between emotions and biological systems which is dependent upon the cultural context, agreeing that “socio-culturally determined patterns of experience and expression are acquired and subsequently feature in specifically social situations.” Armon-Jones notes that, given that emotions are constituted to serve socio-cultural functions, there is implied a social responsibility, in that a member or agent of a culture is responsible for their adoption and expression, in the context for which they have been prescribed, so as to reinforce social values (Armon-Jones 1986:32). According to constructionism, the social role of emotion is the regulation of anti-social behaviour and the promotion of attitudes that

affirm a society's dominant practices. Given this theoretical framework, it is unsurprising that constructionists have tended to approach humour from the standpoint of internal community regulation of anti-social behaviour rather than as a culturally-endorsed mode of challenging external regulation of Indigenous communities.

The Theory and Elements of Humour

Antony Chapman commented that "to possess a good sense of humour, or at least to laugh at humorous and pleasurable events, is regarded as healthy and desirable" by most people concerned with the subject of humour. He points out: "The average person believes that having a reputation for a keen sense of humour is something to be treasured and protected" (Chapman 1976:7). Indeed, most people would agree with Michael Mulkay that humour is an ordinary, everyday activity. Few would claim to have no sense of humour and probably all people, at some point in time, have taken part in creating or in participating in humour (Mulkay 1988:1).

However, most of us would also agree with Christopher Wilson that "humour is everywhere but defies examination" (Wilson 1979:3). Wilson concluded that, since Plato's pioneering work in 355BC, writers such as Aristotle, Hobbes, Descartes, Kant and Schopenhauer have been trying to define the evasive essence of humour (Wilson 1979:9). Mulkay has argued that, at least since the time of Thomas Hobbes (1651), Western scholars have tried to make sense of the phenomenon of humour. Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson's accounts of the mechanisms of jokes and laughter are often used as starting points for further study (Mulkay 1988:1). Part of the problem lies in its many definitions. One can only recognise humour in the context in which it operates; there is simply not one definition that covers all of its aspects. One clear problem that bedevils definitions of humour is whether it is to be seen as a stimulus, a response or a disposition. The Macquarie Dictionary includes all three in its definition that humour is "the quality of being funny (stimulus); cheerful and good-tempered amusement (response), or the capacity for seeing the funny side (disposition)."

Further, and most pertinent to my argument, literature on emotion reveals that humour provides a realm of safety and release. The existence of humour enables participants to enter a domain in which features suppressed with difficulty under normal circumstances, are allowed free rein. In this sense there is no doubt that humour has social value and great practical usefulness. Freud divided the funny into three categories, the comic, humour and wit, relating each category to psychological states of mind. Humour can ease social conflict, relieve tensions and promote order within the social group. Martina Kessel recently argued that, for a number of cultural analysts, “groups on the margins, similar to Jewish Germans in Imperial Germany, managed to appropriate ethnic humour, thereby rendering themselves visible and rewriting their status from negative projections to members of American society,” although she also notes that many have argued these are based on negative characterisations (Kessel 2011:10). Ethnic humour’s contribution to interpersonal rapport and to the resolution of potential conflict over such issues of social justice as racial or sexual exploitation and political oppression, is invaluable. In these instances, humour can provide relief, easing tensions that could otherwise erupt and be expressed as destructive, passionate emotions such as anger and hostility.

Freud says that humour gives pleasure when otherwise painful emotions might prevent it. He notes that forms of humour vary significantly, in accord with the emotional feelings that are compressed in its favour, for example, sympathy, anger, pain and compassion. He claims that manifestations of humour are determined, above all, by humour being entrusted with the task of removing possible emotional hindrance to a pleasurable effect, setting aside inhibiting emotions and allowing room for humour “which smiles under tears” (Freud 1905:371). Mulkay remarks that humour involves controlled nonsense. It conforms to plausibility requirements that are quite different from, and much less stringent than, those that operate in serious discourse. In the mundane activity of our everyday lives, we inhabit a social world in common with the people around us. In serious discourse, it is assumed not only that each speaker will “maintain a firm boundary between the real and unreal, but also that the boundaries of the different speakers will coincide” (Mulkay 1988:122). Mulkay

also states that humour results where there is a sudden movement between, or unexpected combination of, distinct interpretive frames (Mulkay 1988:27). J.M. Suls proposed that “a necessary ingredient of humour is that two or more incongruous ways of viewing something (a person, a sentence, a situation) are juxtaposed.” Humour occurs when a sudden incongruity is expressed which is then made congruous (Suls 1972:82).

Mulkay points out that humour is a commodity and, as such, can generate profit. It is probably the main component of light entertainment, for example, of variety shows and situation comedies, providing temporary relief from the rigours of the serious world (Mulkay 1988:179). Kessel argues that, in the late-twentieth century, humour’s political meanings may have receded in democratic countries, but in the early twenty-first century, are back again in anti-Islamic caricatures (2011:9). Gruner adds that if humour is pleasing to the audience then that might enhance its persuasiveness, making the message more favourable and more memorable. People enjoy humour and react more positively to the speaker who provides this enjoyment. So too, the communicators most likely to improve their image with their audience are the ones who choose to use apt and appealing humour (Gruner 1976:288). When humour is used as a commodity in the entertainment business, wit and satire play a vital role. Gruner defines wit as “a form of verbal cleverness which has the potential for amusing but is also intended (consciously or unconsciously) to achieve some other purpose.” One such purpose may simply be to demonstrate the cleverness of the creator of the witticism, another may be to ridicule, perhaps maliciously, some person, institution or object (Gruner 1976:288)

Conflict humour, “to cure folly and punish evil,” includes such forms as irony, satire, sarcasm, burlesque, caricature and parody. Gruner considers satire to differ markedly from other forms of humour and to be the most persuasive form of wit (Gruner 1976:288). Freud who divides wit into two kinds, harmless wit and tendency wit, regarded satire as a special form of tendency wit having the purpose and the capacity both to amuse and to ridicule with its linguistic double entendre. He says, “The purpose of satire, through laughter and invective, is to cure folly and punish evil” (Freud 1905:371).

Laughter and Joking

Joyce Hertzler declares that laughter almost always occurs in a social context and is almost always socially mediated (1970:93–94). Laughter is a social phenomenon, with its origins in the mists of time. It has social functions such as revealing group allegiances and establishing and reaffirming group values and attitudes; laughter can also serve as a safety valve against excessive group arousal. It alleviates forms of motivational arousal such as fear. A person may laugh to conceal fear when faced with the enormity of a crime. Laughter can also attract attention and convey information.

The early philosophers Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes presented theories of laughter that could be described as superiority propositions (Chapman et al. 1976:95). One only has to listen to sessions of parliament to realise that those early theories of superiority still prevail today. People still burst into laughter when they see their enemies embarrassed, humiliated or injured; yet they do not enjoy similar indignities inflicted upon themselves or their friends. Stupidity, weakness and even ugliness appear funny in those we hate, but not in those we love. Misfortunes and setbacks seem more amusing when they happen to the right people. Chapman says: “Witnessing the disparagement of those things we do not hold dear is enjoyed because it gives us a moment’s glory of superiority.” On the other hand, “ridicule of esteemed objects in contrast cannot be tolerated because it is considered degrading and debasing” (Chapman et al. 1976:95).

Sigmund Freud wrote, “A joke is a playful judgement” (1905:11). However the brevity of this sentiment does not sum up all he has to say about joking. Although he stresses the need for brevity in joking for jokes to be effective he claims that it is important to have the right technique. He declares that jokes lift internal inhibitions and are able to expose the hostile, the cynical and the sceptical. By so doing, jokes go beyond the production of pleasure and become tools of power. Freud observed that a joke begins in play, deriving pleasure from the liberation of nonsense; but then it can rise to the help of major purposes such as combating suppression and fighting against the forces of critical judgement and oppression

(Freud 1905:137). Following the example of Freud, Wilson (1979), however, categorises jokes as either innocent or aimed. For example, aimed jokes can express motivational themes of sexuality or derision, but when a joke is free of ulterior motives, the content is described as innocent (Wilson 1979:78). As a social psychologist, he poses the questions: what motivates one's response to humour; and why do people enjoy listening to jokes? He suggests that jokes are usually pleasurable stimuli and have the capacity to amuse or to provoke laughter. If it affects or expresses motivated states, joking can imply personal functions for the joker or the audience. For instance, if the joke is rewarding or gratifying, it is described as having a positive personal function. On the other hand, if the joke has an adverse or frustrating effect, it is regarded as having a negative personal function. Humour can be spontaneous or contrived. When jokes stem from unintentionally ambiguous or erratic speech, or from unexpected events, where reality is in a sense the joker, then spontaneous or natural humour can be expressed. Informal humour is purely spontaneous, whereas contrived humour has purpose, and as Freud would say, contrived humour is aimed. In a sense, joking can be used, for example, to reflect and partially compensate for failings, dissatisfactions and alienation. "Freed from ignorance, inhibitions, fear and prejudice, the super psyche would have no need for humour" (Wilson 1979:331).

When jokes operate outside the assumptions and expectations of ordinary, serious discourse, "participants are aware that the events depicted in a joke occur within the special world of humour where as long as the speaker sustains the humorous mode, almost anything can happen." Jokes have the characteristics of paradox. Joking, for example, provides "a useful channel for covert communication on taboo topics." Normally people are not held responsible for what they do to the same degree as they would for a serious gesture. A factor analysis conducted by Wilson indicates that themes of sexuality, derision, self-disparagement, exploitation, dominance and rebellion against authority can potentially evoke amusement. His studies have shown that these are the central themes of informal, professional and institutional humour (Wilson 1979:91). Wilson notes that jokes with erotic content are termed sexual; jokes voicing

hostile meanings are referred to as aggressive; and those with critical or abusive content are described as derisive. Jokes deriding other people express a content of ridicule in an incongruous form, the ridicule portraying other people as being more inferior than ourselves. Because self-esteem and self-satisfaction are determined and defined by relative, rather than absolute, judgements, such themes provide pleasure by allowing us to compare ourselves favourably with the butt of the joke. Wilson (1979:148) says that to gain self-satisfaction we need only compare ourselves to those who are achieving less; to obtain self-esteem we merely need to compare ourselves to those who are less attractive. It seems that derision provides pleasure by allowing us to compare ourselves favourably to others; but this pleasure seems to be defined as amusement when the ridicule is expressed in jocular form. Derisive themes contribute to the humorous impact of the joke. It is socially and personally acceptable for people to deride deviants, competitors or members of out-groups and there are few inhibitions against enjoyment of such derision. It simply means that people mistakenly define the pleasure derived from such themes as being a component of the amusement provided by the joke form (Wilson 1979:148).

Wilson points out that people also seem to find amusement in self-ridicule, deriving pleasure from self-critical joking, which can be a form of social play. This apparent amusement may be genuine or insincere, but always seems to reflect resilience and adjustment rather than masochistic self-criticism. Genuine amusement at self-ridicule may be experienced when the individual is faced with seemingly insuperable problems. In such circumstances amused acceptance may be the most economical response, enabling the individual to salvage pleasure and deny pain or harm (Wilson 1979:149). It has been observed that Afro-Americans tell more racist and anti-African-American jokes than White Americans. Racial self-disparagement has been confirmed by other studies; Theodor Reik (1962), for example, has suggested that Jews are the real masters of anti-Semitic jokes.

The Anthropological Perspective

Forty years ago, Maladev Apte (1976:194) claimed that humour had not been investigated as closely as the institution of marriage, kinship, socialisation, technology, food habits, economic transactions, language, religion, political institutions, folklore, ideology and values, all of which had been described and analysed in studies of individual cultures and presented in most standard ethnographies. He went on to remark that humour had been studied by anthropologists in a topical fashion. Topics have included institutionalised joking within kinship and other types of social relationships, humour in religion, tricksters, ludicrous figures from mythology and folklore, linguistic humour (especially verbal banter), insults and riddles.

Since then, Mulkay (1988) has also bemoaned the lack of general studies of humour in anthropology, noting that “the systematic and thorough analyses of the multi-faceted nature of humour in terms of its development and its relevance to, and functions within, the context of individual cultures” was generally absent. On the other hand, anthropological studies of humour in religion, referred to as ritual humour, are extensive and diverse and more recently, there has been an explosion of interest in the nature and socio-cultural significance of humour across disciplines: by philosophers and educators (Lydia Amir, 2014; and Mordecai Gordon 2013), historians (Kessel and Merziger 2011), and cultural researchers (Jocelyn Chey and Jessica Milner 2011). Much of this has concerned what has come to be known as “ethnic” humour (for example, David Gillota 2013), although a great deal of this focuses on the United States.

In 1952, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown had claimed that joking, through the control of aggressive and antagonistic feelings, supported group solidarity by enabling a stable system of social behaviour to be maintained. The effects of joking can be broadly categorised as either conservative or radical. Any effect of joking that tends to preserve the existing social organisation is described as a conservative function, whereas effects that provoke change or undermine the social system are described as radical functions. It seems clear that joking can be a powerful conservative force. Its effects can reinforce existing ideology, power, status,

morality, norms and values within a society. These conservative functions are achieved most effectively in tribal societies where joking is an expected norm of behaviour (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:186).

In Mary Douglas's view, however, humorous discourse cannot even be recognised as such, unless it expresses the social situation in which it occurs. The central idea, then, is that there is a direct correspondence between humour and social structure. Joking takes place because of contradictions, oppositions and incongruities which find expression through the medium of humorous discourse (Douglas 1968:153). Douglas concerned herself with questions such as, "What is the difference between a joke and an insult? When does a joke get beyond a joke? Is the perception of a joke culturally determined so that the anthropologist must take it on trust when a joke has been made? Is no general culture-free analysis of joking possible?" (Douglas 1968:362). Douglas partly answers these questions by saying that "the joke form rarely lies in the utterances alone, but can be identified in the total social situation." Douglas's claims that anthropology has moved away from the simple analysis of social structures to the analysis of thought systems are supported by recent cultural studies scholarship. Martina Kessel suggests that humour is centrally concerned with inclusion and exclusion, but there is still a keen debate whether humour's role lies

in integrating or suppressing voices, not only by being subversive or affirmative, but also by constructing or deconstructing identity, disputing boundaries, and negotiating appearances. (2011:16)

In this way, Chapman notes that although humour has many social functions, three seem to be of particular and general significance. Humour promotes group cohesion and social control, and is supportive in situations of inter-group conflict (Chapman 1983:173) or, as David Gillota comments, "Humor provides a socially sanctioned release valve" (2013:5). One of the first goals of any group is to remain unified in the face of a variety of actual or potential forces that might threaten or disrupt it. Groups under stress may develop a sense of humour as a response to this threat; for example, humour generated in concentration camps, prisons and, indeed, in Aboriginal groups when dealing with White oppression.

As Wilson observed, the expression of humour in social groups reduces prevailing anxieties and hostilities, and fosters rapport and personal attraction. "The humour is the oil in the social machine, lubricating group dynamics, easing frictions that threaten group solidarity" (Wilson 1978:228).

The second role of humour, social control, may seem aggressive. The difference is that it does not divide or separate groups but requires that group members accept group norms and reject deviance (Chapman 1983:174). David Gillota argues that ethnic humour is about both excluding and including, and this is true for humour created by marginalised groups as well as that created by dominant groups (2013:6). Ethnic humour, he notes, "has the potential to build group solidarity" (2013: 6). The social dimension penetrates all levels of understanding of a joke. "Even its typical patterning is subject to a social evaluation of the elements. There are jokes that are perceived clearly enough by all present but are rejected. Here again, social forces are at work, for social norms may judge a joke to be in bad taste, risky, too near the bone, improper or irrelevant. Such controls are exerted either on behalf of the hierarchy as such, or on behalf of values which are judged too precious and too precarious to be exposed to challenge" (Gillota 2013:6).

"Whatever the joke and however remote its subject, the telling of it is potentially subversive. Since its form consists of a victory of un-control against control, it is a metaphor for the levelling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones." In relation to the social conditions for a joke to be made, Douglas proposes that "a joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring at the same time. All jokes are, therefore, expressive of the social situations in which they occur." "A joke unleashes the energy of the subconscious against the control of the conscious" (Douglas 1968:368).

A joking relationship is the phenomenon which involves playful behaviours between two individuals who recognise the existence of special kinship or other types of social bonds between them. Such a relationship displays reciprocal verbal or action-based humour, including joking, teasing, banter, ridicule, insult

and horseplay. While research findings have generated many definitions, narrow and broad in scope, the following has perhaps been the most widely accepted by scholars in Anthropology, “A relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence” (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:186). It is this requirement to “take no offence” that has enabled marginalised groups to use humour “to defend, redraw, or challenge the traditional boundaries that have been used, for decades or even centuries, to separate and define various ethnic groups” (Gillota 2013: 6). While a great deal of this research on ethnic humour occurs in the context of the United States as a multiethnic society, I intend to demonstrate in this chapter that humour is a strong ally in countering or dealing with oppression and in subsequent chapters I will show how Aborigines were able to survive under oppression by employing the use of humour in their everyday lives.

Humour as used by oppressed cultural groups

The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines oppression as harsh exercise of power or authority and unjust impositions on subordinate groups. From this definition, it is clear that power comes into the equation in that it goes hand in hand with oppression. I see power as the flip side of the coin, making it impossible to adequately address oppression as a single entity. Hence the following discussion will, of necessity, include power, because like emotion and humour, oppression and power are inextricably entwined.

Power is described by Margaret Sargent (1983) as a generalised capacity to affect social activities and “seen by many sociologists as the most basic dimension of stratification in society” (Sargent 1983:193). Andrew Parkin et al. are more specific, emphasising that power has the ability “to influence, force, dominate, control, coerce, constrain and so on” (Parkin et al. 1980:264). They see authority as a manifestation of power and associated with legitimacy which in turn attributes appropriateness to it. This point will be clearly understood when we discuss in later chapters how oppression affected Aborigines. But leaving that

aside for the time being, it is reasonable to regard power as a formidable adversary in overcoming oppression, especially when members of subordinate groups learn through actual experience how to be persons of inferior status. Sargent classifies this condition as “victim socialisation.” She maintains that through socialisation, the oppressed learn not merely that they are inferior, Black or female, but the appropriate behaviour as well which is “passivity, conciliation, listening but not speaking” (Sargent 1983:57). These are the signs of acceptance of being victims. On the other hand, the dominant groups learn to behave as persons of superior status in that “they learn that they are the kind of people who give orders, govern the country, head the office, dominate the conversation and so on” (Sargent 1983:58).

In his 1985 study of power and resistance, James Scott explores what he terms the “weapons of the weak.” He identifies more subtle strategies of resistance which the oppressed engage in every day:

the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them. Most of the forms this struggle takes stop well short of collective outright defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does “between revolts” to defend its interests as best it can. (1985: 29)

Scott’s subsequent work expands on this concept, and identifies in the language used between dominant and oppressed groups a “public transcript” (1990:2–3) and a “hidden transcript” (1990:4). Scott argues that the public transcript is a form of performance engaged in by both dominant and oppressed groups. He explains:

The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear. The dominant never control the stage absolutely, but their wishes normally prevail. In the

short run, it is in the interest of the subordinate to produce a more or less credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him. The result is that the public transcript is – a crisis – systematically skewed in the direction of the libretto, the discourse, represented by the dominant. (1990:4)

In contrast, the “offstage” language of oppressed groups, Scott calls a “hidden transcript”: a collective cultural product which may take the form of parody, revenge fantasy or “millennial visions” (1990:9). It is this hidden transcript that Scott suggests is vital to understanding power relations between dominant and oppressed groups, but which are invisible to almost all observed relations. Indeed, Scott asserts that: “Social science is, in general then, focused resolutely on the official or formal relations between the powerful and weak” (1990:13).

My argument in this thesis is that humour represents just such a “hidden transcript” for culturally specific groups for whom oppression has been a significant long-term condition, and particularly for Aborigines. Scholars who study humour are divided as to whether humour can be interpreted as an effective form of resistance. Victor Raskin concludes that, for many scholars, “resistance through joking provides mostly temporary relief but stabilizes potentially conflictive situations” (2008:369); but there is, nevertheless, a good argument to be made that humour as a “weapon of the weak” enables marginalised groups to express their anger, reflect upon their position in society and to create a space for resistance (2008:369). I will now explore two significant groups who have been identified as using humour as a socio-cultural strategy in coping with oppression: Black American and Native American peoples. In chapters four and five of this thesis, I will address in more detail how Aborigines entered a process of strengthening identity and gaining empowerment when they began to use humour to write about themselves and their life experiences under White domination.

I have selected Black Americans and Native Americans for comparison with Aborigines because these groups have similarly suffered the erosion of their language and culture, experienced centuries of oppression, and, for the Native Americans, the perils of invasion and conquest. These groups have, nevertheless, retained an ancient, oral tradition of folklore and ritual, a significant part of

which is a rich tradition of humour. Native Americans (American Indians) have much in common with Australia's Aborigines, although within different time frames. They are the Indigenous people of America who lived in social groups very similar to those in Australia. They were usually hunter/gatherers and shared the same close affinity with the environment as did Australian Aborigines. American Indians had to deal with sudden change when their lands were invaded by White settlers. Their contact history with Europeans is strikingly similar to that of Aborigines. They suffered massacres, loss of tribal lands and sacred places, loss of languages and dreadful oppression; but they too have survived and their culture has endured. Black Americans are different in that they are dispersed throughout the world as slaves, becoming minority groups in those countries where they have settled. These cultural groups, although sharing, historically, the experience of oppression, provide an interesting comparative frame of reference for assisting our understanding of how Australian Aborigines used humour, in a form unique to their own culture, as a coping strategy for dealing with their situation.

Black American Humour

Humour all too often emerges from suffering as Arnold Zable reveals: "Humour is the Jewish Novocain, a morphine drip, a pain killer. Humour is the language of those who have been forced to live by their wits, those whose options have been limited" (1995:22). Zable cites Lippman as saying: "Wit produced on the precipice of hell was not frivolity but psychological necessity," and Richard Grunberger who claimed, "Anti Nazi humour was both a low key expression of resistance and a form of therapy" (Zable 1995:23).

For James Scott, slavery in the United States provided a revelatory glimpse of the hidden transcripts produced offstage by oppressed peoples (1990:5-6). David Gillota argues that Black American humour rises directly from the experience of slavery which produced, according to W.E.B DuBois, a "double consciousness" that is possibly reflected in Scott's notion of public and hidden transcripts: "Got one mind for the white folk to see/ 'Nother for what I know is me" (2013:23).

This double consciousness formed the basis for oppositional “black-versus-white” humour and also the need for “Black communal spaces in which African Americans could express their criticisms of the dominant culture freely” (2013:23).

Gillota argues that these communal spaces and their boundaries are not only essential to producing humour but form an important part of the humour itself, and have been successively updated by new generations of Black American comedians. Citing the Black comic Richard Pryor, Gillota calls these “Just us” spaces in which – while White audiences may be present and may find the humour – “the humor itself, and the spaces in which it is performed, are the cultural property of African Americans” (2013:24). What is important about the boundaries being set up by Black American comedy is the creation of Black spaces – communities in which Black viewers are included and White viewers implicitly excluded – and dominant White culture can be critiqued.

In terms of the humour of subordinate groups, Black American humour is important because, while it may have begun under conditions of slavery as a hidden transcript – and aspects of the humour may still be hidden from the dominant White audience – the popularity of Black American humour in the mainstream United States has enabled it to emerge and be studied.

While a major difference between Black American humour and Aboriginal humour is the crossover appeal and visibility of Black American humour which, according to Gillota, has resulted in a dilution of the subversive elements of the humour (2013:21), there are useful similarities in the way in which Black American humour creates a space in which resistance is possible. Next, I consider Native American humour which more closely reminds us of that of Aborigines.

Native American Humour

A pan-Indian joke about the invasion of America, effective because of its brevity, is a good example of Freud’s definition of wit. It is recounted by Lincoln: “What did you call this country before whites came?” A Mount Rushmore tourist asks a modern-day Sioux. “Ours” quips the fine feathered friend (Lincoln 1993:39).

Native American experiences in regards to dispossession of land and culture are similar to that experienced by the Aboriginal people. Vine Deloria, a Native American, provides an insight into the humour of Native Americans when he says: "One of the best ways to understand people is to know what makes them laugh. Laughter encompasses the limits of the soul. In humour life is redefined and accepted. Irony and satire provide much keener insights into a group's psyche and values than do years of research" (Deloria 1969:146).

Keith Basso, in *Portraits of the White Man* (1979), regretted that the "great capacity that Indian people have for creative wit has been obscured by the image of the Indian as a silent stoic." Kenneth Lincoln in *Indi'n Humour* (1993) quotes from Stanley Vestal's "The Hollywooden Indian" the following: "Yet the Indian is actually a very human person – humorous, sexy, sensitive, touchy, and quick-tempered, a great gossip and practical joker, a born mimic, a politician from infancy, and an incorrigible lover of human society" (Lincoln 1993:13).

Harold Cardinal explains that, in social discourse, Indians and Whites misunderstand each other. He claims that Whites are socialised in childhood to react to strange situations with a great deal of activity, adopting action after action until the situation changes, persisting in trial and error until he gets it right. In the same situation the Indian "is brought up to remain motionless and watch. Inwardly he is using all his senses to discover what is expected of him" – what activities are proper and safe. Cardinal says, "The White man is taught to be aggressive. His motto is try, try, try again. The Indian puts his faith in observation" (Cardinal 1969:75). He further observes: "Luckily Indians have resilience to match their stoicism" (Cardinal 1969:75). "We will survive the stupidities of bigotry, the indignities of condescension and the gushing of do-gooders" (Cardinal 1969:77).

Christopher Columbus gave the Indigenous people of America the name Indios. While the first Europeans, with their different dialects, pronounced Indios as Indien, Indianer and Indian, the latter became common usage. Much later the French name Peaux rouges, or Redskins, as we know it, came into usage also. Dee Brown tells how the Indians, as was their custom when meeting strangers,

presented Columbus and his men with gifts and treated them with honour (Brown 1970:1). To the King and Queen of Spain, Columbus described the Indians as tractable and peaceful. "I swear to your majesties there is not in the world a better nation. Their discourse is sweet and gentle ... they are naked, yet their manners are decorous and praiseworthy" (Brown 1970:1).

Sadly, over the next four centuries, from 1492 till around 1800, Europeans enforced their ways upon the "sweet and gentle people" of the New World. The Spaniards soon followed Columbus in their greedy quest for gold and precious stones. Brown records how they "looted and burned villages, kidnapped hundreds of men, women and children and shipped them to Europe to be sold as slaves." Indigenous resistance was no match for guns and sabres. Whole tribes were "destroyed in less than a decade after Columbus set foot on the beach at San Salvador."

As a result of more than three centuries of White contact following Columbus's landing at San Salvador, and of more than two centuries of English settlement in Virginia and New England, many Indian tribes were completely obliterated. Lincoln makes this powerful statement about the situation of the American Indians:

For American Indians a five-hundred-year holocaust exploded in the slip stream of Christopher Columbus. His wake vaporised 97 per cent of the 75 to 100 million natives in the Western hemisphere. Pre-Columbian, indeed, signifies a Native American world not discovered, but decimated. (Lincoln 1993:3)

In the nineteenth century, the thirty-year span between 1860 and 1890 was an era of violence and greed perpetrated by White invaders, similar to the period of Australian colonial warfare. While the culture and the civilisation of the American Indians were being destroyed, myths were being woven of the American Wild West – tall tales and true of fur traders, gamblers, gold seekers, missionaries, cavalrymen, cowboys and homesteaders. Scientific theories corroborated the belief that racial difference, civilisation and manliness all advanced together. Bederman in linking Whiteness with power claims that white Americans had long associated powerful manhood with white supremacy and

non-white and uncivilised denoted unmanliness. Thus warfare between the white man and the Indian was inevitable. "Only virile masculine combat could establish whose men were superior and deserved to control the land and its resources. The new American race, able to advance civilisation to ever greater heights was predestined to prevail against the barbarous Indians" (Bederman 1996:180). In American folklore, Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone were depicted as manly and civilised and racially superior in their exploits as white frontiersmen compared with their Indian counterparts (Bederman 1996:183). Furthermore Bederman notes that Theodore Roosevelt in the early 1900s claimed the American race had a sacred duty to advance civilisation by wresting the continent from the Indians and instilling a higher civilisation. "Indeed the white man's race war against the Indians was really a holy crusade for human evolutionary advancement. The rude fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilised mankind under a debt to him" (Bederman 1996:182).

Dell Hymes, in his foreword to Keith Basso's work *Portraits of the White Man* writes about Indian humour:

They are great Mimics and buffoons, also and entertain themselves excessively at the expense of whites with whom they have associated, and who have supposed them impressed with profound respect for their grandeur and dignity. They are curious observers, noting everything in silence, but with a keen and watchful eye; occasionally exchanging a glance or a grunt with each other when anything particularly strikes them but reserving all comments until they are alone. Then it is that they give full scope to criticism, satire, mimicry and mirth. (Basso 1979:ix)

Vine Deloria states that teasing was used for social control long before the white invasion. "Rather than embarrass members of the tribe publicly, Indian people used to tease individuals they considered out of step with the consensus of tribal opinion. In this way egos were preserved and disputes within the tribe were held to a minimum." Deloria also points out that individual members of the tribe engaged in teasing themselves "as a means of showing humility. For example, they might deprecate their own feats of bravery. This was usual practice and served to highlight their virtues and gain them a place of influence in tribal circles" (Deloria 1969:169).

The Indian cartoonist, Vincent Craig made this observation to Lincoln: "Indians can relate humour to anything. They get a laugh out of any type of situation, whether it is hardships, poverty, adverse conditions, happy conditions, whatever, Indians find something to laugh about" (Lincoln 1993:96). The Aboriginal actor, Ernie Dingo has made similar remarks about Aborigines.

Much humour was a response to the White presence. Cardinal writes that "The early reservation days were times when humorous incidents abounded as Indians tried to adapt to the strange white ways and occasionally found themselves in great dilemmas." Cardinal informs us that the problems with missionaries "in the early days provided amusing stories which have become classics in Indian country. They are told over and over again whenever Indians gather together, and are sources of much laughter and amusement" (Cardinal 1969:150).

Cardinal shares with us a statement made by another Indian:

The biggest of all Indian problems is the white man. Who can understand the white man? What makes him tick? How does he think and why does he think the way he does? Why does he talk so much? Most important of all how do we deal with him? Obviously he is here to stay. The white man spends half his time and billions of dollars in pursuit of self-understanding. How can a mere Indian expect to come up with the answer? (1969:74)

There were humorous strategies to gain the upper hand. Basso (1979) observed that "when Apaches switch from Western Apache ... to English ... for the purpose of imitating Anglo-Americans, they use the language in a special way; and it is this distinctive style of speaking – a style characterized by stock phrases, specific lexical items, recurrent sentence types and patterned modifications in pitch, volume, tempo and voice quality – that signals to those familiar with it that a particular form of joking has begun" (Basso 1979:9).

The anthropologist Niels Braroe conducted field research on an Indian reserve in Canada in 1975, and he records many con games performed by the Indians when dealing with Whites, particularly the ranchers. He writes about the Indian who sold fence posts to a rancher but instead of soaking the posts in preservatives, he

used laundry blue. Another Indian sold unseen posts and when the buyer called to take delivery and found a quantity missing, the Indian said someone must have stolen them. Another trick that was common to all Indians was a way of stacking the fence posts so that there appeared to be more than there were. Revisiting the con games provided great entertainment later when the Indians socialised in their own group.

Incidents of duping whites occurred regularly. Braroe wrote that an Indian would call at the home of an absent white man and tell his wife her husband told him to collect money for work he had done but in truth he had not done any work for the husband. Or an Indian would persuade a white man to drive him to a reserve in sub-zero weather only to be told when they arrived that he had no money to pay him for his trouble. Again, an Indian would offer an item to a white man as credit for a loan of money then never return to pick it up. Most of the time the item would have no value. For example, an Indian left his gun with the white man for some money. He never came back for his gun which had the firing-pin missing, so it was useless anyway (Braroe 1975:167). He observed that Whites regarded the Indian as foolish and irresponsible children; while Indians did not accept their judgements, they seldom openly disputed these white conceptions. They considered themselves rather artful and successful exploiters of white men. Jokes are made about the gullibility of whites and fine points of strategy are discussed. For instance, when facing court they would say: "The way to get off easy is act like a dumb Indian in front of the Magistrate" (Braroe 1975:168). On another occasion an Indian made this comment to Braroe: "Because I can trick the white man so easily, they are not as smart as they think they are. I can make a living by my wits" (Braroe 1975:172).

Lincoln cites an informant who has this to say: "Whatever the period, Native Americans have always reviewed the white man's national and personal characteristics and dramatised his actions, follies, and motives through art, performance, stories and jokes." He comments further and in doing so he adds support to the above statements made to Braroe: "They have caricatured the fire and brimstone of the missionaries, the financial gouging of the traders, the

hypocrisy of the great white chiefs and the credulity of the anthropologists” (Lincoln 1993:91).

Margaret Craven’s *I Heard The Owl Call My Name* recounts occasions of Indian humour directed towards white men. She describes an encounter with a young and zealous police constable who visited the village of Kingcome to investigate the drowning death of a boy. It begins with the constable castigating the chief and his men:

“You had no business to move him. You know the rules. In an accident the Body must not be moved.”

“We were not sure he was dead. We thought we could revive him.”

“And when you couldn’t you should have covered him and left him there.”

“On the edge of the river with the tide coming in? In the rain?”

They entered the vicarage, Constable Pearson plucked the sheet from the body and leaned towards it. Then he bolted from the room, down the rickety steps and into the bush where he was very sick. The Indians were delighted, laughter rose in their eyes – higher and higher and hovering there in tremulous balance. Not a drop overflowed. When the constable returned from the bush, all eyes were sad again and all faces solemn.” (Craven 1967:17)

Another of Craven’s anecdotes is about a police sergeant, who when he was young and inexperienced ignored the Indian custom and took photos of the fishing of oolachan, a small, very oily fish, harvested annually. He knew they did not permit pictures but he figured that they could not stop him. “They were very polite but when helping him into his boat one of the young men dropped the camera in the river. All the way down the path he was sure he could hear them laughing” (Craven 1967:64).

Although, in recent times, humour occupies a prominent place in Indian life, with one of the most popular topics of Indian humour being the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Deloria contends that “tribes are brought together by sharing the humour of the past. Columbus jokes gain great sympathy among all tribes [which] share a common bond in relation to Columbus jokes. It gives a solid feeling of unity and purpose to the tribes” (1969:147). He comments further regarding the use of humour during meetings and the bonding that occurs

through laughing. He says “the more desperate the problem, the more humour is directed to describe it: Satirical remarks often circumscribe problems so that possible solutions are drawn from circumstances that would not make sense if presented to other than a humorous forum” (1969:147).

Another enduring subject for Indian humour is General Custer. Deloria maintains that “there are more jokes about him and the Indians than there were participants in the battle. All tribes feel a sense of accomplishment when thinking of Custer. Custer binds together implacable foes because he represented the ugly American of the nineteenth century, ‘who got what was coming to him’” (1969:167).

Deloria believes that all Indians would agree that humour is the cement that holds the Indian movement together. He claims: “When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems that people can survive” (1969:167).

An informant of Lincoln expresses the same sentiments to him in a questionnaire: “Not to make much of it, but [humour] is the best and sharpest weapon we’ve always had against the ravages of conquest and assimilation and while it is a tiny projectile point, it’s often sharp, true and finely crafted” (Lincoln 1993:7).

In this way, Native American humour can be interpreted as a type of hidden transcript that can be outwardly deferential but subversive in intent (the camera dropped in the water). It can also be seen as participating in the process of communal boundary building (as in the case of the Columbus jokes) and more generally as a site of resistance against the “ugly American.”

The written literature of the Native American renaissance began in the late 1960s. They focused on the humour from jokes in bars and at meetings, to those in kitchens, or the quiet wit of old, wise people. Many Indian academics are writing tribal literature in Western forms, adapting origin myths, trickster gods, healing ceremonies and oral histories to novels. The Indian playwright, Hanay Geiogamah has written a number of plays, *Body Indian*, *Foghorn*, and 49

(published in *New Native American Drama* (1980)), as well as *Coon Cons Coyote*. Born in 1945, his work shows an influence of Bertolt Brecht: "Geiogamah's dramas play out the anger and pain of being Indian for five hundred years under Euroamerican occupation" (Lincoln 1993:125).

Body Indian, first performed in 1972, is described as a pan-Indian play, dangerously humorous: it dramatises Indians living off reservations, "on the skids" in Oklahoma, "drinking away meagre lease payments, scamming, laughing, singing and stealing from one another to stay alive" (Lincoln 1993:164). Lincoln goes on to say that the comedy is bleak, "the impoverished situation all too Indian. They stick together to die tribally. Indians have one another for better or worse, old bonds, new burdens, where kin means ideally communal, born poor, dispossessed and desperate" (Lincoln 1993:164). The kind of irony in this play is familiar particularly to those Indians who are derailed by the mainstream and Geiogamah emphasises the "low comic survival of the losers' humour." His intent is to draw on "honesty, revelation, cathartic change and social commitment in hoping for a better life" (Lincoln 1993:164).

Foghorn premiered in West Berlin when Geiogamah's troupe toured Europe in 1973. According to Lincoln, it is an ensemble piece, a tribal play in old ways modernised – a series of mock improvisations, trickster style, Indian and white caricatures and clichés. It is designed to entertain as well as to teach using concise theatrical satire. *Foghorn* opens with Columbus's lookout exclaiming, "Los Indios" and "Estos hombres, cho-co-lates." This history quickly fades to white settlers barking, "Don't talk back," "Vermin," "Varmints," "Filthy savages," "I say let's force them off the land." Then a nun addresses her brood of Indians, "My blessed savages" and a clownish schoolteacher terrorises bucks and squaws learning English, saying that English is "the one true language" (Lincoln 1993:167). The play winds down with a Wild West show and fades to the occupation of Wounded Knee. "It opens the flood gates of Indian caricatures. Its joking taps a deep historical resentment and cauterises a contemporary wound festering in social ills." Lincoln says that the humour lies "in recognition, in release, in playing out the hurt, as the play celebrates what it means to be alive today in Indian America" (Lincoln 1993:168).

49 is a work that affirms all Indians coming together in “powwow” to celebrate their tribal identities. Geiogamah wanted the young people in the cast to be positive in the face of despair and unreasoning force. With music and native percussion instruments – bells, whistles, rattles, ratchets, bull roarers. Apache violins, flutes, various sizes of drums, piano and guitars, tribal bodies move in concert, singing and dancing on an 1885 Oklahoma ceremonial ground. Lincoln makes the following assessment of the presentation:

The life forces of grounded belonging, loving senses, social singing, communal stimulants, and bonding against adversity tie the people to their past and with one another. The dancers stand together against the police, defy disruption, and reassert their rights to being Indian in native America (Lincoln 1993:169).

This flourishing of Native American literature and drama is similar to the situation in Australia. In the 1970s Aborigines used the theatre as a weapon of the weak when they began to write their own plays and act their own dramas on the stage. In later chapters I examine how recent Aboriginal cultural productions in theatre, literature, film and visual art, made possible by breakthroughs in literacy, have assisted in overcoming the culture of silence and disempowerment for Aborigines and enabled Aboriginal humour to become more visible to mainstream Australia. Access to education enabled Aborigines to have their works published; to highlight Indigenous issues. Similarly Native Americans were empowered to speak out about their situation through the various mediums of literature, theatre and drama, and visual art. This signalled another way out of the silence of the oppressed.

Native Americans also had a rich oral and ritual tradition and a strong belief system which placed them within the natural environment. Like most pre-capitalist societies where social interaction takes place on face-to-face terms, they had a system of self-regulation in order to maintain social control. Teasing was one way of ensuring that group members obeyed communal rules. Likewise, Aborigines also share a similar history of oral tradition and storytelling.

Despite their experience of oppression, Native American Indians managed to cope with rapid change, learning to adapt to the dominant white culture. They

managed to do this by upholding those aspects of their culture which had endured since the shock of white contact and with a stoic resilience nourished by a goodly dose of humour. Their sense of humour usually occurred at the expense of the White invaders.

Aborigines and Native Americans followed different pathways, only now learning to succeed as they painfully learn to cope with white man's culture. In my view, the similarity ends here and the differences take over. For example with the first white settlements in North America, in contrast to Australia, the invaders met Indigenous people with concepts of warfare and the ability to organise for it. On the other hand, while there was a frontier war in Australia, Aborigines' weapons of resistance were far less effective. In the initial North American experience, the rights of the Indian nations were established, "if somewhat tenuously" in European law (Rowley 1970:10). The treaties made with each tribe did establish European rights to occupy and use tribal lands. At the same time European legality recognised that prior occupation gave rights to certain defined groups of Indians. With Aborigines no such treaties were ever signed or rights recognised and as a consequence they became more disempowered and depressed than any other minority group overwhelmed by British rule. Again, as Rowley draws to our attention, perhaps it is significant that the settlement in Australia occurred during a later period in history when the Industrial Revolution was in full swing in Britain, implying that things could have been different.

It is one of the tragedies of Aborigines that Australia was colonised when Britain was becoming an industrialised nation; that the demand for fine wool should coincide with a combination of cheap land, comparative absence of resistance ... small capital outlay; that religious restraints on profit making had given way to the Protestant Ethic and popular pseudo-Darwinism which could explain the passing of the Aborigines as a law of nature. (Rowley 1970:17)

As Rowley succinctly explains, Aborigines had no economic value according to the economics of colonial development, therefore there was no reason to consider their position in the land they claimed was *terra nullius*. It is a pity that Rowley was unaware of the role "Whiteness" played in disempowering native

Americans and Aborigines. In the 1970s this was not an advanced research area and in recognising this I think Rowley would have agreed that Whiteness was a formidable deterrent to the empowerment of native peoples. In reference to Native American disempowerment, “Whiteness” was embodied in American manhood and virile imperialism. So American nationhood itself was the product of both racial superiority and virile manhood (Bederman 1996:183). There will be more references to “Whiteness” in the following chapters in relation to Aborigines and their efforts to become empowered.

Conclusion

In summary then, research evidence shows that emotions are a vital part of human nature, and play a very important role in our lives. They can influence our lives, both within, and between, different groups at the cultural, social, personality and biological levels. Research shows also that the emotions and humour are “socio-culturally constituted” and that humour enables features suppressed with difficulty under normal circumstances to be given free rein. In the case of marginalised cultural groups, I have argued that humour can be read as part of the hidden transcript of power relations between dominant and subordinate groups, and that Black American humour and Native American humour can be examined as sites at which the hidden transcript becomes visible and its function as a unique communal space and a critique of the dominant culture is able to be studied. In the next chapter, I apply this concept to Aboriginal humour.

CHAPTER 3: ABORIGINAL HUMOUR

The paradox that humour forms with truth is one of man's oldest insights into himself and his situation. I think I have recognised its evidence among the Aborigines. (Stanner 1982:41)

Jim Kable quotes Indigenous-Australian TV presenter Ernie Dingo as saying, during an interview: "Aboriginal humour is basically untapped. We laugh at nearly everything; everything is basically a laugh within a story. Even in moments of sadness, Aboriginal humour has a sense of survival. Often it is the only way we get through hard times. We have moments of seriousness but basically an Aboriginal lifestyle is full of humour" (Kable 1990:38). These sentiments are reflected in the lives of many Aborigines, and certainly ring true for my own family, especially in the days of my childhood when grinding poverty and the dark forces of racism entrapped us.

The final frontier for the English colonists was Australia: its original purpose as a penal colony soon gave way to greed for land ownership, facilitated by the British declaring Australia *terra nullius*, defining Aborigines as animals and treating them as such. At the same time, the British constructed themselves as civilised and the Aborigines as uncivilised. Colonialist ideology saw ownership of land as the hallmark of civilisation, so they had no qualms about dispossessing the Indigenous people of their lands and depriving them of their culture. The loss of land, culture and identity started as soon as the British arrived on this land. Indigenous populations dwindled because they had no immunity against introduced diseases such as smallpox. In addition, the squatters on their lands regarded them as pests to be exterminated and within a few years minor skirmishes were developing into massacres. The removal of Aboriginal people to reserves and missions disrupted their lives and culture, as did the government policy of social engineering which forced assimilation of the mixed-blood children, known today as the Stolen Generation. Later, I make special reference to Nancy de Vries, a member of the Stolen Generation.

This is the context within which Aboriginal humour functioned and, in this chapter, I address aspects of traditional humour employed to regulate and control social groups; and how, since settlement, humour has changed to engage with oppression. That humour has been a significant tradition in Aboriginal life is demonstrated by evidence collected across the later twentieth century from the ethnographies of anthropologists who conducted fieldwork in Australia. That it remains prominent in the daily face-to-face relations of Aborigines becomes clear.

Tradition and Humour

Tradition, according to Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin (1984:273), implies an authentic continuation of cultural behaviour and expression from the past to the present. However, according to Jeffrey Kent Parker, although cultural systems are largely shaped by the predetermined patterns of inherited tradition, “change” is also a vital process in the formation of a cultural identity over time (Parker 1999:2). In his unpublished thesis, “Canoes, ‘Sacred Gates’ and Gold Mines: Change and Continuity in Tradition,” Parker argues that both change and continuity are composite processes in the ongoing formation of the cultural expression known as tradition. He also argues that although tradition was, in the past, commonly perceived as static and predetermined, it is a process that implicitly involves the continual absorption of new features. He believes that change in itself is not sufficient grounds for denying authenticity to any particular representation of tradition, and that a people’s social, political and historical experiences “are not mutually exclusive of their cultural beliefs or expressions” (Parker 1999:1). Traditions are generally considered to provide direct association with the past that verifies cultural identity as a continuum. However, although traditions are associated with the past, they are represented in the present, and accordingly involve both continuity and discontinuity simultaneously. Thus “continuity and change” are combined in the continuing development of traditions “from past to present” (Parker 1999:96)

Furthermore, ongoing epistemological debate on the question of tradition by Eric Hobsbawm (1983), Jocelyn Linnekin (1983) and Robert Ulin (1995) has demonstrated how traditions adapt new elements into the established

framework of a society, and also that traditions which appear, or claim to be old are often recent in origin and are sometimes “invented.” In the light of Parker’s research, I am persuaded to concur with his findings when he maintains that: “The concept of tradition can be seen to equally involve the incorporation of innovation, adaptation and socio-historical experience, as well as the transmission of established practice” (Parker 1999:96). Basil Sansom’s 2001 essay, “written round four funny stories from Northern Australia,” and entitled “Irruptions of the Dreamings in Post Colonial Australia” is also relevant to this question of tradition:

Metamorphosis, instigated by a dreaming is central to all four stories and this is why the stories are counted as ‘funny’ and received with glee. The analysis illuminates a topic that has been attracting attention in recent contributions to Aboriginal ethnography: how dreamings irrupt into contemporary histories and act in ways that have political significance, contesting whitefella paradigms and re-asserting the world-view of the original Australians. (Sansom 2001:1)

The essay is interpretative, and each one of the stories, told to him at different times during fieldwork in Northern Australia, is described as “a story of metamorphosis, that bears witness to the uncanny presence of Dreaming Powers amongst us in Australia today.” As explained by Sansom, metamorphosis makes the stories politically subversive because, in each of them, an original Dreaming Power turns the conditions of existence topsy-turvy as it reasserts its dominance in the face of whitefella occupation of the land. Sansom suggests that “stories that return power to age-old Divinities must surely be ranked as texts of cultural resistance” (Sansom 2001:1). “One story is about the sign of a Buffalo Dreaming; another about a cyclone; the third about silent trading; and the fourth about the advancing growth of mimosa on the black soil plains.” All the stories are “funny.” Each has a moment of surprise, that is “made triumphant and hilarious.” Sansom observes that on “hearing such stories, people are impelled to respond by chuckling and chortling on and on, laughing together in appreciation of that Power that suddenly has been revealed to them in its panoply of character and might” (Sansom 2001:1).

I have referred to Sansom because his research on tradition supports the findings of Parker. Sansom’s interpretations of these stories highlight the links

between the continuity of traditional Aboriginal humour and its changed role in the present use of humour as an identity marker.

Another example of tradition involving adaptation that places humour as central to Aboriginal experience is the ABC programme, *Bush Mechanics*. This is an offbeat series that follows the adventures of the Bush Mechanics, a group of likeable Aboriginal men, in their travels through Central Australia. Introduced by Aboriginal elder, Jack Kackamarra, each episode features the bush mechanics from the remote Warlpiri Community, “presented with a new set of challenges, which include: catching a car thief; getting a nephew out of gaol; racing to an outback rock concert; and travelling thousands of miles to gather pearl shells for a rainmaking ceremony. As they travel through the desert in their dilapidated cars, they solve problems with inventive bush repair techniques.” Jupurrula is the magic mechanic who appears out of nowhere to help the bush mechanics when they get into real car trouble. The series is a blend of documentary and drama with anecdotes from life in the bush: gathering bush tucker; living in humpies; football; and rock and roll.

In Episode One – “Motorcar Ngutju” (Good Motorcar), the bush mechanics have formed a rock band but have no car to get to their first gig. They repair a derelict car, fill it up with their equipment and hit the road. Jupurrula helps them fix various car problems caused by the rough roads. Episode Two – “Payback” finds the bush mechanics going to Alice Springs to collect their nephew, Walter, from gaol; he must now return to his community to face Aboriginal tribal law or “payback.” After a spirit visits Walter in his dreams, the bush mechanics are also in trouble when half of them are arrested for unpaid warrants. Episode Three – “The Chase,” describes a win against the football team Yuendumu Magpies. When four team players miss their bus home, they take the car of the rival team’s coach. This is followed by a hilarious car chase when the bush mechanics are asked to catch the culprits. The fourth and final episode, “The Rainmakers” features the rainmaker Jungala who needs to relieve his country from severe drought. He summons the bush mechanics to travel to Broome to get rainmaking pearl shells.

In the old days, Jungala would have traded bush tobacco for pearl shells but today he trades a different commodity – a motor car he painted with the Rain Dreaming. He sings them on a safe journey. The bush mechanics are beset with dust storms, fires and unfamiliar landscapes as they travel to saltwater country to trade an old Ford car for the magical pearl shells. The combination of adventure, magic, realism and a distinctive brand of Indigenous humour, provides a ‘unique insight’ into both contemporary and traditional culture that illustrates the importance of humour to Aboriginal culture.

Aboriginal Society and the Role of Humour

As noted above, culture and humour are interconnected in Aboriginal culture. Members of Aboriginal societies and cultures have been described by Ronald and Catherine Berndt as, “ordinary, intelligent human beings guided by their own belief systems and their accepted behavioural patterns” (Berndt and Berndt 1964:515). Traditional Aboriginal societies and cultures are, however, highly complex. Max Charlesworth added weight to this statement when he wrote: “[While] technologically and materially, Aboriginal culture is of extreme simplicity ... Religiously and spiritually, [Aboriginal culture] is of extreme complexity and subtlety” (Charlesworth 1984:5).

In Aboriginal societies, humour works as a complex institutionalised practice at the heart of the culture. To fully understand these statements, Siegfried Frederick Nadel claims that we need to refer to discussions regarding small-scale societies and their methods of maintaining social control and self-regulation. He says: “The social controls found in a culture ... are a body of customs by which behaviour of the participants is regulated so that it conforms to the culture.” (Nadel 1971:2).

The anthropological field is rich in instances that demonstrate that societies keep their orderliness, culture and character through controls that may appear undeveloped or even lacking. In the absence of police and institutions people regulate their own behaviour with the help of others in their society. Their guide to desirable behaviour is the value system to which the society adheres and people will push transgressors in the direction of desired behaviour. Without actions being value-oriented their efforts will, indeed, be short lived. Nadel

claims that these value-oriented actions are the true elements of self-regulation, and: "They are safe, known, routine, and remain such, because their routinised procedure affords maximum success" (Nadel 1971:2).

In small-scale societies, customs and tradition govern a wide field of conduct and activity. The pull of perceived tradition may then produce a reluctance to abandon a tried and trusted routine for risky and untried methods. It is clear that social control mechanisms in a self-regulating society explain the strength of shaming, ridicule, teasing and humour, and also the institutionalised procedures of socialisation which safeguard value. Nadel describes this as a circular process, so that, "Values engender conduct and conduct reinforces values" (Nadel 1971:2).

Despite the many organisational forms found in small-scale societies, the mechanisms that sustain them tend to be embedded in everyday life. In small-scale, close-knit communities, in which people find themselves in continuous close contact, the possibility of being exposed to ridicule or disapproval would be an important mechanism of control. In many small-scale societies it is reported that individuals attempt to reduce conflict through poking fun at those guilty of unacceptable behaviour.

The other side of the coin is that humour can also authorise the individual to critique institutional and social practices – licensing otherwise undesirable behaviour, producing the opposite affect to self-regulation and conformity. Joseph Butwin's essay, "Seditious Laughter," identified this quality in humour, for which an analogy can be drawn with the jester in a medieval royal court who, by virtue of his acknowledged position as a joker and buffoon, who conveys disapproval in a light-hearted and humorous way.

Butwin cites the Russian critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, on the emergence of festive folk laughter in the literature of the Renaissance. Bakhtin found that this laughter was first of all determined by the traditions of medieval culture of humour which carried a political thrust. "It was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom and ruthlessness. 'Having on the one hand forbidden laughter in every official sphere of life and ideology, the Middle Ages bestowed exceptional privileges of license

...: in the marketplace, on feast days ...,’ in the carnivals and feasts of fools, in the elections of mock popes and kings ... festive laughter means the defeat of power, ... of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts” (Bakhtin qtd in Butwin 1978:32).

Another analogy can be drawn from Butwin citing Fagin in *Oliver Twist* who reminds Charlie Bates that the “defenseless prisoner has one last line of defense” by saying that “he can break the court up with laughter,” and furthermore, “a good comic actor can begin to defend himself against pompous authority,” he can employ the “first franchise of the disenfranchised” which is their capacity for laughter (Butwin 1978:17). Butwin added: “The defenses of the poor were few: comedy was one which could be used with impunity” (Butwin 1978:18). With reference to the nineteenth century thinking of the day, Butwin quoted the reported comments of the Bishop of London in 1811: “The ‘social order’ is to be preserved by gravity, it is destroyed when the lower classes ‘laugh’ and ‘titter,’ especially ‘in the presence of their superiors’” (Butwin 1978:24).

This concept of seditious laughter can be related to the experiences of Aborigines, for example, Jack Davis, in an interview with Adam Shoemaker in 1989, comments that Aborigines have always acted up in the courts. I remember my nephew and my niece exhibiting seditious laughter when facing court: my nephew, much to my chagrin, joked and entertained his support group when waiting to hear very serious charges against him in court; my niece, well-known to the police for her troublesome antics when intoxicated, boldly proclaimed in front of the magistrate that she had mended her ways. Asked if she could be believed this time (having made several such promises in the past), she exclaimed: “Because I am a born again Christian.” This announcement brought smiles to many of the serious faces of those in court.

Relating nineteenth-century British fiction and European folk practices to Indigenous experience is not such a long bow to draw as it might seem. Simon Roberts records how the Mbuti of Zaire (the earliest inhabitants of Africa) acknowledged the ability of clowns and buffoons to take the edge off disputes by ridiculing and making fun of the disputants. “The tension is diminished by these diversionary tactics and scorn is poured on any individual whose actions

threaten the security and harmony of the group” (Roberts 1979:63). Because of the jesting way in which these warnings are conveyed, retaliation is avoided; although this might not be the case if more serious interactions were employed.

In the 1960s, the anthropologist Lloyd Warner observed and recorded a similar happening during his field study of the Aboriginal group known as the Murngin. During the Ullmark ceremony, clowns paint themselves to represent centipedes; they dance and entertain but, most importantly, it is at this ceremony that old feuds are settled and clowns help to prevent open fighting and the destruction of ritual. Warner gives a graphic description of how this is managed.

A man noted for his clownish abilities takes his spear and spear thrower from his personal basket, eats his food in an absurd manner, and generally acts the fool while he talks in Kidjin language. Everyone laughs at his performance. If one of the quarrelling men turns on the clown, he points his spear to him and pretends to spear him. The general loud laughter from everyone keeps the angry one from committing any overt act, and since the clown and his audience express no hostility, the offended man cannot cause trouble. (Warner 1964: 312)

It is clear that his clowning is a method of preventing feuds from breaking out during the ceremony and social control is maintained. Nadel describes this social control mechanism as having an additional value of sanctification because it is a part of ritual (Nadel 1971:63).

Similar practices by Aboriginal people were observed by Tom Petrie, a settler in early Queensland, who wrote in his memoirs: “Always there were two or three funny men among the dancers, men who caused mirth and amusement by their antics” (Petrie 1983:21). Later Petrie observes an initiation ceremony or, rather, initiation preparation, for some boys:

The boys were placed lying down in a half circle with their heads covered. When dusk came on the men would assemble before them and go through all sorts of antics — jumping, dancing, laughing, mimicking — everything they could think of. With their fun they tried to tempt the boys to laugh, and speak or look up... The capers some of these men would cut and the way they walked and talked and strutted about must indeed have been laughable... Even that would not bring laughter from the boys who knew better, having been warned before-hand... This trial kept up for a couple of hours or so. (Petrie 1983:41–42)

Mervyn Meggitt, whose field work was carried out among the Walbiri people, records that a youth being groomed for initiation must avoid his circumciser or sub-inciser until the ban on their association is finally removed. For many months, the boy behaves circumspectly towards his circumciser and tends to avoid him; for should he encounter the operator before the ban is lifted, he would be ashamed and fearful — not only because he is in the presence of the man who had ritually killed him, but also because the meeting violates the law. However, in preparing the novice for initiation there is much joking and hilarity as they grease his body for the initiation ceremony. Meggitt relates how the interactions going on between the two also includes a traditional routine which governs their actions.

Next morning, the boy is again brought to meet his circumciser, who produces a boomerang ... [and demonstrates how it is used] ... The two then laugh loudly together in unison. The circumciser similarly shows the boy how to chop a tree trunk with an axe; and the novice imitates him. ... the two again laugh together, for 'they are happy, they are now friends.' (Meggitt 1962:308)

As well as Meggitt doing so, W. Lloyd Warner (1964) and Berndt and Berndt (1985) record instances where sexual humour is displayed. For example, Warner observes that "men and women have clandestine meetings but it is generally known which people are having these assignations in the surrounding bush and many broadly humorous remarks are passed by both sexes about the various lovers" (Warner 1964:112). Berndt and Berndt explain how a young man wanting a surreptitious affair with someone who is not "straight" for him, adjusts his own subsection label so that according to subsection rules, she can become eligible: "It makes for an enjoyable combination in a new style of joking relationship and a show of following the rules" (Berndt and Berndt 1985:90).

Meggitt says that if an audience includes only close kin or friends, spouses may indulge in mildly obscene humour. But heavy-handed sexual joking is common in all male groups: "A man's extra-marital affairs, even the size of his penis, can provide material for sharp witticisms in his presence, provided he is normally on good terms with the speaker; but it is ill-mannered, and indeed dangerous to mention his wife in the jokes" (Meggitt 1962:89). Donald Thomson describes an example of obscene humour which can be found among the peoples of Cape York

Peninsula. In addition to an unorganised type of swearing, there is a type of swearing behaviour which is organised under a definite social sanction (Thomson 1935:475).

Obscene humour is also found in the song poems of the Yanjuwa people of Northern Australia. Their oral traditions are rich and extensive and consist of Dreaming Ancestor epics which tell the stories of their Spirit Ancestors across the landscape. These stories are in turn contained in the song cycles, called in Yanjuwa *Kujka*. For the purpose of this section of the chapter, I want to focus on individual songs. The poetry of these songs has the ability with a few words to evoke images of situations, incidents, people and places.

Songs recorded by John Bradley (1994) speak about relationships across generations. These songs reach out and bring joy to singers and listeners. Bradley says that these songs arouse the “strongest feelings for the importance of the past which gives the singers a balance and meaning to what is, at times, an uncertain present or future” (Bradley 1994:5). These songs were sung to Bradley and their meanings explained, quite often amidst riotous laughter and teasing as the meanings of particular words and phrases were clarified. The audience for these individual songs can range from one or two people to larger groups. Gestures, non-verbal communication between audience and singers, the location, the setting, the occasional spontaneous dance movements or other activities that may have been occurring while the singing took place all add to the atmosphere of *joie de vivre*. Bradley summarises the diverse effects of the song poems: “The songs arouse feelings ranging from contemplation to sadness, to joy, to high hilarity, to an atmosphere filled with sexual innuendo and a degree of eroticism” (Bradley 1994:4).

Australian Aboriginal social organisation is often discussed in terms of kinship. Kinship is the basis of social relations and a general range of behaviour is expected in any given context. However, kinship terms are only part of any kinship system; just as important is the behaviour associated with them. Being related to a person in a particular way not only means using the correct terms but also conforming to proper conduct in respect of them. Berndt and Berndt state: “This may entail complete avoidance or restraint or circumspection, a

special taboo or special duties or rights. It may involve a joking or bantering relationship or one in which the person can act with comparative freedom” (1985:80).

Joking Relationships

Joking relationships have been extensively examined by anthropologists in diverse cultures throughout the world; notably in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and North America, in addition to Australia. Joking phenomena involve playful behaviour between two individuals who recognise special kinship or other types of social bonds between them. Such behaviour displays reciprocal verbal or action-based humour, including teasing, ridicule, insult, horseplay and other similar manifestations — usually, but not always, in the presence of others.

What is a joking relationship? As mentioned before, Radcliffe-Brown’s definition from the 1950s continued to be widely accepted by other scholars. He depicts it as a relationship “between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence” (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:90). Central to this concept is the freedom similarly offered by “seditious laughter” to create a space for criticism and critique in spite of unequal status and power relationships. A great deal of joking in classical Aboriginal society was, and for many still is, organised along kinship lines. There are certain people with whom you must not joke, some with whom you may joke, and others with whom you must joke, and there are many different kinds of joking deemed appropriate to particular kin relationships (see Radcliffe-Brown 1952, Mary Jackes 1969, Stanner 1982).

The joking relationship is described by Radcliffe-Brown as a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism; in other words, the relationship is one of permitted disrespect. Radcliffe-Brown adds a further dimension to this explanation by saying that it is “a custom by which persons standing in certain relationships resulting either from kinship or more usually from marriage, were permitted or required to behave towards one another in a disrespectful or insulting way at which no offence might be taken” (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:105).

Radcliffe-Brown justifies the need for the joking relationship in terms of its positive social function, as follows:

Social dysfunction implies divergence of interests and therefore the possibility of conflict and hostility while conjunction requires avoidance of strife. The joking relationship produces a stable, ordered system of social life by creating mutual respect and restraint. Thus avoiding strife. It is evident that a relationship in which insults are exchanged, and there is an obligation not to take them seriously, is one which avoids real conflict ... Instead of specific duties to be fulfilled there is privileged disrespect and freedom or even license, and the only obligation is not to take offence at the disrespect so long as it is kept within certain bounds. Any default in the relationship is like a breach of the rules of etiquette; the person concerned is regarded as not knowing how to behave himself. (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:103)

The joking relationship phenomenon is widespread in Aboriginal Australia. Certain classes of kin relate to each other with a “conventional demeanour of joking, teasing and jocular obscenity” (Guard 1996:1). Murray Guard refers to Thomson’s 1935 essay, “The Joking_Relationship and Organised Obscenity in North Queensland” as, remaining into the 1990s, one of the most detailed social anthropological studies of the topic in Aboriginal Australia. Cliff Goddard refers to joking relationship language as being light-hearted speech practices (Goddard 1992). Patrick McConvell called it “conventionalised or formalised joking” (McConvell 1982, 1988). Robert Tonkinson described joking relationships among the Mardudjara in Western Australia as being, generally, between certain same-sex relatives, and to involve, “rowdy exchanges of sexual explicit epithets and mock abuse, with much body contact and sexual horseplay which amuses onlookers at least as much as the joking pair” (Tonkinson 1978:47).

W.E.H. Stanner reported: “When an Aborigine meets his wife’s brothers he utters a very expletive sound which to European ears sounds vulgar” (Stanner 1982:44). He says that the man will sit or stand some distance away, and in a high pitched voice, quite unlike his usual way of speaking, will call out a long series of insinuating epithets, vulgarities and sometimes obscenities about his wife’s brother. Stanner refers to this behaviour as venomous endearments. He says the man does not mean them. “The tone and pitch of his voice show this ... A chorus of appreciative laughter from the audience, if he thinks of something really outrageous, shows the presence of formal convention” (Stanner 1982:44).

Murray Guard writes of the same custom: "This speech practice involves ironic insults with no intent to cause offence or serious argument but rather to create humour." He adds that in a culture where great emphasis is placed on sociability and kinship: "Humour has become an important obligatory aspect of the way that certain groups of people interact" (Guard 1996:4).

Robert Tonkinson, in discussing ceremonial activities of the Mardudjara of Western Australia, reported that in most ceremonial activities involving two sides, the groups sit a short distance apart and engage in lively verbal jousting in a loud and light-hearted fashion much to the amusement of an appreciative assembly. These expressions of good-natured opposition always enliven an already exciting and joyful atmosphere. Tonkinson remarked that the Mardudjara have a keen sense of humour that pervades all their activities including ritual. He stresses that there are very few ritual occasions where laughter and joking would be out of place.

In this period of constant adjustment, the Mardudjara Aborigines will be well served by their strong sense of identity and pride in their traditions and the law. They also have their great sense of humour, and resilience of body and spirit, that speak volumes for their determination to survive. (Tonkinson 1978:13)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, shaming is a very strong social control mechanism in self-regulating societies and this is very powerful in maintaining social control in Aboriginal groups. Humour goes hand in hand with shaming, especially in the teasing strategy. J. B. Loudon contended that teasing is part of the process of informal communication between persons and groups: "Teasing not only conveys a social function but it also affects individual values and attitudes" (Loudon 1970:294).

In the Aboriginal context, teasing serves to mark differences between groups and is also a proven release for aggression. In Aboriginal communities, teasing marks the boundaries around people and aids in preserving the distinctive heritage of the group. It also serves to underline the linguistic and social differences between people who value the maintenance of these differences. Coombs et al. have pointed out that teasing encourages conformity within group boundaries (1983:105).

Annette Hamilton (1981) has also said that teasing in the Aboriginal context can be verbal or non-verbal or a combination of both. Adults engage in it sporadically either with one another or with children. Again, the purpose seems to be to correct behaviour, but sometimes it is the possibility of irregular behaviour that is the target of teasing. In this case the aim is to prevent its happening: "Teasing also serves to test the equanimity of a child and gives practice in the most necessary of attributes in a very public society – a non-committal face" (Hamilton 1981:42).

That teasing was a strong agent in the socialisation of Aboriginal children can also be seen in Anne Eckermann's research findings in the 1970s. She reported that Aborigines of South-East Queensland lived in socio-economic circumstances very similar to those found among working-class, Euro-Australians generally; consequently, they could be labelled assimilated, integrated or acculturated. However, a strong and positive sense of being Aboriginal persisted. This identification, she maintained, was due to certain factors such as child-rearing, common historical experiences and a flourishing system of folk-lore.

Referring to child-rearing practices, Eckermann stated that one typically Aboriginal aspect was teasing children, from early toddler-hood, with such terms as Black baby, Black fellow, and coloured baby. These terms were emphasised over and over again:

Teasing by adults and among siblings ensures that a child is always reminded that he or she is an Aboriginal; this 'colour consciousness' is emphasised more as he grows older and social contact makes him aware that he is different from the other children in his group. By the time he might be seriously hurt by such derogatory remarks, he is accustomed to them, uses them himself about members of his own group, and has become emphatically 'Aboriginal.' (Eckermann 1977: 300).

Julie Carter (1988) contends that idioms of stigma inure children through foreknowledge of the hurtful racial interaction they might face in adult life. Goffman defines stigmatisation rituals as strategies for managing a stigmatised identity (Goffman 1979). Agreeing with Goffmann, Carter concludes: "The ritualised teasing of Aboriginal children can be seen as a mechanism for the management of stigma and begins the process of strengthening the corporate

identity of Aboriginal people” (Carter 1988:72).

Nicknaming

An aspect of Aboriginal humour not often acknowledged by writers and anthropologists, but very common in the interaction within Aboriginal groups and communities, is the practice of nicknaming. It is appropriate, therefore, to examine the practice of nicknaming in Aboriginal communities and groups, and especially the use of humour in the origin of nicknames. The art of nicknaming occurs in the wider Australian community and, indeed, the world over; but the practice of nicknaming in Aboriginal groups often has the specific purpose of exercising an element of social control, albeit subtle. Peter Sutton in a personal communication said: “I generally find that all Aboriginal men, and a number of women, have nicknames. The men’s nicknames at least are often funny, typically arising from some incident in the childhood of the person” (Sutton 1998).

Anthropologist Donald Thomson, on the basis of fieldwork observation, wrote about names and naming among the Wik Mongkan tribe in North Queensland. Thomson noted that although kinship was an important variable in ordering social relationships, naming or designation under one or another kinship term is sometimes overridden by other considerations, especially where distant relatives are concerned, and nicknames were one of these categories, usually derived from some physical peculiarity or deformity, often of a temporary nature. These are not only terms of address, but have a social function, in that they express some peculiar relation in which the individual stands in relation to the larger society. This is their chief importance (Thomson 1972:9).

Nicknames relate purely to the individual and may be used freely. They are often used to avoid mention of the personal names of taboo relatives. Thomson found this usage of nicknames to be quite common on Cape York Peninsula; but to have reached its greatest height of development among the Wik Mongkan tribe (Thomson 1946).

H.W. Scheffler (in Thomson 1972), who edited some of Thomson’s work, listed some examples of nicknames in use among the Ompela and related tribes. Examples include the following:

1. *Takko*, meaning left handed. Left-handedness is not uncommon among the Natives of Cape York, and a left-handed person is almost invariably called by this term. It may be used by anyone, except certain close relatives, such as one's children.
2. *Madoi-binda*, meaning having spots, was given to a girl who was afflicted with sores on her face, allegedly because her father had eaten stingray flesh while she was still very young and while this flesh was still taboo to him.
3. *Panwaltoi*, meaning crooked big toe, was given to the one with this particular deformity.
4. *Yukkomukkangobi*, meaning the one who likes big trees was given as a nickname to a man who boasted about his prowess as a climber of big trees.
5. *Mutu-Mudo*, means the round one. This nickname was given to a girl who failed to grow much in childhood.
6. *Pondo-mudo*, refers to the knee. This nickname was given to a woman who was lame because she had been speared in the hip. She was indignant that Thomson was told about it, saying that it was just a name applied in fun. (Thomson 1972:9)

Christine Nicholls worked for almost a decade as school principal in the remote Aboriginal community of Lajamanu, situated in the northern-most fringe of the Tanami Desert in Australia's Northern Territory. Lajamanu is home to 700 Warlpiri people and about 30 or 40 whites who mostly work in the service areas. Warlpiri children drew her attention to the flourishing practice of nicknaming. She says that the nicknames were bestowed both on Warlpiri people and on non-Aboriginal residents, the difference being that the white residents "usually remained blissfully unaware of their alternative 'monikers'" (Nicholls 1995:137). This lack of awareness attests to the extent to which humour can function as what James Scott identifies as a "hidden transcript" as discussed in the previous chapter.

Nicholls records that many nicknames are conferred on community people — both adults and children — because they were considered to have transgressed Warlpiri social or ethical behaviour or because they were thought to have overstepped the mark in other respects. "The Three Big Shots," for example,

were so named because they became powerful and wealthy men at Lajamanu, from royalty payments from a goldmine, situated on traditional land. The names indicate that the three men have broken the tacit rules which require them not to stand above their fellow Warlpiri (Nicholls 1995:137). “Forty Dollar” is the man who stretches the kinship system that little bit too far by repeatedly demanding loans of forty dollars. “Motor Car Face” is the woman who expects her friends and family to provide transport to drive her anywhere and everywhere the whim takes her. Such nicknames form a collective sanction and a means of social control. Nicholls states that they also have a good deal in common with the gossip, slander, taunts and insults that are also manifest in remote settlement life.

Some nicknames refer to personal attributes considered desirable such as “Man Fighter,” the nickname given to a woman who beat up her drunk and disorderly husband. “Old Woman” was given to a girl who was wise beyond her years and whose conduct was befitting that of an elder. The “Silent One” was given to a man who was respected for his silence and ability to keep his own counsel (Nicholls 1995:137).

Non-Aboriginal teachers were of course prime targets for nicknames. Nicholls states that these nicknames were witty, apposite, and suggested familiarity even where it was non-existent. A tall, long-legged woman teacher earned the nickname “Brolga” because of her characteristic stance. Another, considered to be a poor driver because his four-wheel drive weaved across both sides of the dirt track, leaving tyre tracks resembling a tadpole’s tail, was given the name “Tadpole.” A teacher who spoke in patronising Pidgin English, was given the name “Bush Turkey” after he said to some Warlpiri people, “you like-im eat-im bush turkey? Us two-fella go longa creek to get-im us bush turkey then?” (Nicholls 1995).

Nicholls recounts how a disrespectful nickname given to a male teacher was “linti-lirra” which literally meant “mouth like a vagina” because of the shape of his lips and furry mouth. The man’s social behaviour, according to the Warlpiri people, was quite unacceptable; for while still a teacher on the payroll of the Northern Territory Education Department, he was involved in shonky second-

hand car deals with Warlpiri people. He spoke openly in derision of Warlpiri culture. "The Warlpiri people, young and old found this nickname vastly entertaining and would laugh uproariously and appreciatively whenever it was used" (Nichols 1995:138).

Nicholls records that the most censorious nicknames are reserved for white men and often indicate hostility to white men as a group. Nicholls states: "While most of the other nicknames are defused of a good deal of their aggression through the palliative of wit and humour, this is not the case for the majority of nicknames conferred on white men" (Nicholls 1995:144).

Less than two generations earlier, Warlpiri men had nicknames imposed on them by white men such as "Darkie, Sambo, Jumbo, Rastus, and even, Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini." So it is possible to interpret some of the nicknames that Warlpiri people bestow on white men as a form of symbolic retaliation. "Warlkanja-pardu," which translates into English as liar, bullshit artist or big-noter, was the nickname given to an incompetent white builder employed to build houses on the settlement who, despite his grandiose verbal schemes, only managed to build a mud-brick house after four years and thousands of dollars of public money.

The name "Socks" was given to a white man who wore very tight jeans which drew attention to his genitals. Local people joked that he had stuffed a pair of socks inside his jeans. Similarly "Little Boy" was given to a short slim man who was thought to be racist, aloof and antagonistic. In Warlpiri estimation, his status amounted to that of an uninitiated boy. "Television" was bestowed on a man who never stopped talking, "Pregnant One" was given to a fat anthropologist, and "Crazy Horse" was given to a man who was always "shooting his mouth off," and was regarded by the Walpiri as a loose cannon. Nicholls writes: "Such nicknames show that despite surface acceptance of exploitative, arrogant and overtly racist behaviour or the mere ineptitude or absurdity of some white men, Warlpiri people actually have their number." She concludes that an important function of Warlpiri nicknaming is that of social levelling. Nicknames such as "Big Shot" are powerful cautions for potential aspirants to big shot status (Nicholls 1995:144).

In *The Camp at Wallaby Cross*, Basil Sansom noted what he calls performative attribution. To begin with, the camp at Wallaby Cross is situated on the outskirts of Darwin. It is a free-grogging community in a convenient location which offers out-of-town visitors the opportunity to drink freely. The Darwin camp has a word for the non-drinker: whether Black or White, man or woman, non-drinkers are all called missionaries. Needless to say no missionaries are harboured in the camp. Sansom notes that the absence of missionaries has two aspects. He says: "It stands for both lack of non-drinking people; and for the absence of alien and externally imposed ideologies and instruments of social control" (Sansom 1980:49). The camp is where the missionary type is excluded, so providing freedom and relief from moral condemnation.

A Daly River man, named Ol' Luke, was acknowledged "Masterful Man" at Wallaby Cross. He dominated the camp and over time, those visiting the camp, referred to him as Masterful Man rather than the common term Boss. Masterful Man was a repository of knowledge. He gave town-dwelling Aborigines information about their past. Those (usually light skinned) who had been brought up in institutions came bearing gifts in return for information. On one occasion, he told a young man, "Grandad la you fella, bin callim that one Nugget. Face like polish. Man for boot, always drovin' that one" (Sansom 1988:156). In other words, your grandfather was as Black as boot polish so we called him "Nugget." He was a drover. It is interesting to note that Nugget was the brand name for British black and dark brown boot polish first marketed in Australia in 1906.

Apart from performative attributions, Sansom reports on other societal aspects where the distribution of social knowledge is governed by the "telling details rule." The requirement that certain details be reserved or left out leads to "humbug" and to "gammoning." In and around Darwin, Aborigines treat the words "humbug and gammon" as synonyms. Their use of this mode is deliberate and regular and so their labelling vocabulary for this recognised manner of speaking is developed. While humbugging and gammoning stand for the hoaxing activity, humbug serves as a label for a person. Hence: "You bloody humbug. You bin gib me lotta gammon" (Sansom 1980:61).

So long as the gammoning causes no social damage to a victim, the joke is politically innocent and remains a joke. But when humbug provides a commentary on another's disadvantage it becomes serious business and is no longer playful.

The many examples provided above have shown the importance of shaming, teasing, avoidance and joking in Aboriginal social organisation. These were powerful strategies used by the Aborigines in the resolution of conflict and in the maintenance of social control. Stanner provides a clear insight into Aboriginal humour with the following words: "Luckily laughter does not only antagonise, it also ameliorates and heals. It is the good angel of enmity" (Stanner 1982:48).

Humour remains prominent in the daily face-to-face relations of Aborigines; and its use has been validated by evidence collected across the later twentieth century from the ethnographies of anthropologists who conducted fieldwork in Australia, namely Thomson, Warner, Meggitt, Stanner, Berndt and Berndt, Tonkinson, Bradley, Sansom and others. Their research has shown how humour has worked, constructively, for thousands of years for Aboriginal communities. The following sections will demonstrate its continuity from its roots in the distant past, to the way it is expressed to-day; in particular, its adaptation as a strategy for survival, within a social and cultural context of white European dominance.

Humour in Everyday Life

Yet even the darkest days were always somehow overcome by hope combined with the greatest gift of all against oppression — laughter, and education — that was my key to equality, justice and deciding my own destiny. These things also gave me identity and strength. For if we cried they would have been tears of blood that flooded the Warrego River. (Wharton, *Yumba Days* 1999:1)

In the previous section, a historical perspective on traditional Aboriginal humour was presented; and I will now take a closer look at the humour currently used in the everyday lives of Aboriginal people. The greatest challenge Aborigines had to face was that of survival, and one important strategy for this has been the

employment of humour. Humour has already been described above as a weapon of the weak, wielded by oppressed peoples in different parts of the world. Humour was institutionalised in the traditional past of Aboriginal people, and was adapted as a strategy to cope with life under white European rule. This chapter will demonstrate how humour changed to meet these new challenges.

The previous chapter discussed how much of the character of Black American humour is believed to have its origins in the experience of slavery, and how this influenced its form and content in terms of the creation of Black communal space and the way it functions as a partially understood (hidden transcript) critiquing White American society. Similarly, the position of Aborigines confined many to a form of slave labour for the settlers in the establishment of the pastoral industries of Australia. As discussed earlier, Christian missionaries played an influential role in controlling the lives of the Indigenes.

In the early part of the twentieth century, a very strong oppositional culture emerged, providing Aborigines with a way to counter injustice, prejudice and discrimination. The oppositional culture took pride in flouting the mores of the white oppressors as a defiant reaction to rejection. It was expressed in the humorous mimicry of whites and their habits and resulted in group solidarity becoming a strong sub-culture.

Teasing and idioms of speech inured Aboriginal people, especially children, to hurtful racial interaction with whites. Teasing was also used as a strategy in the management of what Goffman described as “spoiled identity” and the stigma of being Black. This set in train the process of strengthening their corporate identity. Put another way, they learned to live with racism.

The Social Condition of Aboriginal People

Although there were instances of open defiance against their oppressors, Aborigines had little real power when compared with that represented by firearms of the Europeans, and this meant their resistance was often futile. While it may seem that domination was inevitable, this thesis argues that the use of humour was one way of managing the griefs of colonisation and strengthening

resistance to White domination.

When the killings ceased following humanitarian protests, mainly from Britain, pastoralists in the early colonial period saw Aborigines as a source of free or cheap labour. Racist ideologies in the service of the colonising project led European bosses to treat Aborigines not only as inferior, but as poor workers requiring firm control. The dominant mindset was that kindness could be misconstrued as weakness; that fear must never be shown; and that white supremacy had to be maintained at all times. As Richard Broome states: "Work seemed to be the panacea providing discipline, and training in punctuality and subordination. At the same time it augmented the supply of labour. The advantage was that it was cheap labour in return for tobacco, food scraps and old clothes" (Broome 1982:35). Andrew Markus observes that the pastoral industry was by far the largest employer of Aborigines. While the men usually worked with the stock, the women laboured around the homestead. They maintained the vegetable gardens, tended goats and cows, did the housework and laundry, cooked food and carted water. They were also sexual partners for the growing numbers of white stockmen and pastoralists (Markus 1990:51).

Broome records that in 1929, John William Bleakley, the Queensland Chief Protector of Aborigines, stated that it was generally accepted that Aborigines were beyond redemption, and that education "spoilt them;" there was, accordingly, no encouragement for self-improvement and, for that matter, no opportunities either. The Reverend Ernest Gribble, an Anglican missionary, had described Aborigines as children who belonged to a "degraded and depraved race." Broome further relates that, even as late as 1977, a missionary priest in New Norcia, Western Australia, had greeted a group of middle-aged Aborigines with: "Good morning boys and girls." This was followed by the orders for the day, to work hard and "I'll be watching you" (Broome 1982:105). Catholic Bishop Gsell, who spent twenty-six years on Bathurst Island, believed that Aborigines were "wild children of the bush" who could be trained to accept the gospel and civilisation, "because in the long run, the Black man will come to realise that the white man is cleverer and wiser than himself" (Broome 1982:104). The humorous activities of the "oppositional culture" observed by Gillian Cowlishaw

and Jeremy Beckett, and addressed later in this chapter, challenge Bishop Gsell's opinions.

But given these perceptions, it is not surprising that Aborigines were treated as children and, if they by any chance exhibited defiance, were physically punished by their White bosses. Markus writes that it was necessary to establish who was boss and that there could be no tolerance of insubordination. Aboriginal workers were required to obey the master without question. They were not free agents. They belonged to the boss, and if they escaped, they would be brought back by the police. The boss would then thrash them into submission. Markus describes, in graphic detail, the thrashing of an Aborigine with a bullock whip for running away. It was thought necessary, at all times, to guard against disobedience and familiarity, which could give them false ideas (Markus 1990:135).

Cheryl Harris in her studies of Whiteness as property in relation to African Americans and Native Americans writes: "White identity conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits and was jealously guarded as a valued possession, allowed only to those who met a strict standard of proof" (Harris 1996:1726). She quotes Laura Underkuffler's point that to have a white identity in the earlier period included "all those human rights, liberties, powers, immunities that are important for human well-being, including freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, freedom from bodily harm and free and equal opportunities to use personal faculties" (qtd in Harris 1996:1726). Whiteness was a valuable asset in Australian society, its privileges unobtainable to Aborigines.

Black Humour – Weapon of the Weak

Aborigines gained revenge on their bosses in many ways. But their revenge often took the form of a silent revolution. This practice is common among many oppressed people of the world. As discussed in the previous chapter, James Scott observed, during his study in a Malaysian village, that subordinates avoided displaying insubordination and open confrontation with authority, and hid behind a mask of compliance. This created what Scott terms a public transcript

(the public performance enacted by both subordinate and dominant groups which tends to confirm the values of the dominant group), and a hidden transcript which can go undetected by social commentators. These villagers showed a tenacity in self-preservation: "Subordinate groups have typically won a reputation for subtlety ... their superiors often regard as cunning and deception. This is surely because their vulnerability has rarely permitted them the luxury of confrontation" (Scott 1990:136).

Scott identifies some of the weapons used by powerless groups as including "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, sabotage" (Scott 1990:136). He points out that such forms of stubborn resistance are well documented in the vast literature on American slavery where open defiance was considered foolhardy. Aborigines have employed similar tactics of resistance which, in turn, have been the source of a great deal of humour in their everyday interaction with each other. He also points out that this creates mutual defence among subordinates which favours "a distinctive sub-culture, often one with a strong 'us versus them' social imagery." Similarly, David Gillota points out that there is a strong Black-White polarity in Black American humour that excludes other ethnic groups. When this happens, the distinctive sub-culture "itself becomes a powerful force for social unity" (Scott 1990:136).

Broome documents incidents of Aboriginal resistance to subordination such as a peanut farmer in the north who saw his best peanuts eaten by the Aboriginal pickers; and Aboriginal stockmen on a muster who would kill and eat a prime beast, and then make the carcass look like a natural death or a dingo-killing.

Aboriginal boys were expert at spearing vegetables through the cat door of the station store, or at tunnelling under the floor to drain out flour and sugar from the bags on the bottom row. Others sabotaged the bosses' equipment. One manager claimed that his 'dumb' and 'lazy' Aboriginal workers could not be trusted to apply even a few drops of oil periodically to the bore-water rigs, and that twenty-five had blown up in two years at a cost of \$5000 each. Strangely, the bore at the Aboriginal camp never broke down (Broome 1982:135).

Henry Reynolds records the sentiments of a Palmer River goldfields resident in the 1840s who wrote of Aboriginal people that at first they worked fairly well, "but scheming, pilfering, shamming sickness and other devices soon became

manifest" (1990:142). In the 1840s, according to Reynolds, Aborigines became "skilful, subtle and surreptitious" in their raids on European property, and complaints about their pilfering were almost universal. Mrs Aeneas Gunn, author of *We of the Never Never*, was a typical example of a white person being duped by the idea that Aborigines were lazy. Her domestic staff were quite willing to live up to this image: they avoided hard, relentless toil, and jobs they did not like. "Mrs Gunn affirmed that Aborigines withheld information about the location of waterholes on the vast properties so they could hide there when they absconded" (Broome 1982:135).

Broome remarks that acting dumb was a well-reasoned strategy; and that Aborigines, when humiliated by Europeans, often had the last laugh. European stockmen were given derisive nicknames or mocked. Mrs Gunn herself was often the object of mimicry and camp jokes (1982:135). Broome adds, too, that Aborigines found out much about the lives and private details of the white stockmen from the Aboriginal women, and this information was used back in the camp to ridicule Europeans and to afford great humour at their expense (1982:136).

Missionaries were often duped as well, although some soon realised that they were mistaken in their belief that their evangelising was successful. The Aborigines, apparently, were prepared to hear the word of God and faked interest in the missionaries' spiritual message in order to obtain food and blankets. This was an adaptive strategy of survival on their part. Broome reports that the Aborigines at Beagle Bay Mission, Western Australia would laughingly refer to the Trappist Monks as the Hail Marys (Broome 1982:102). Attwood writes about Bessy Flower/Cameron who was sadly removed from her family in the southwest of Western Australia in the mid-nineteenth century, and educated, when very young, by missionaries, who knew nothing about her culture. Dealing with loss and grief, there was no comforting balm, no chance of taking time out from the overbearing missionaries to find solace and mutual understanding with other Aboriginal women who had ways of dealing with grief and loneliness, partly through their humour. "Bessy, however, was too serious-minded and too much part of the missionary order to relieve her unhappiness through cathartic

humour” (Attwood 1989:46). Attwood points out that, very unusually, “letters written by Bessy herself” have survived, while the main sources for a historian of this period are overwhelmingly “the writings of male missionaries and officials of government bodies” (Attwood 1986:10-11) — rendering the Indigenous voices generally silent.

On the other hand, Jackie Huggins provides a different account of how some Aboriginal women coped as domestic servants in the inter-War years of the twentieth century. These women were subjugated and exploited but they never lost their strength or identity because of the “Murrie sense of humour which rose above all else when they related their stories.” Huggins adds: “This humour is shared by group identification which widens the gap between those within and those outside the circle of laughter... Humour allows for relief and pleasure and this helps to explain why it has been notably present among people who seem to outsiders to have little to laugh about ... things can be so funny, yet so deadly serious” (Huggins 1987/88:8).

In an interview with Sandra McLean in the *Courier-Mail* (25 Mar 2006), Leah Purcell also stresses the importance of group bonding. She also learnt from her family how to spin a yarn. “It’s just being Aboriginal” she says, “That’s how Indigenous people communicated. Everything was told through performance. I was always with my mum and around my uncles and aunts. It might have been around a carton of fourx as well but the stories they told and the way they were told would put Whoopi Goldberg and Robin Williams to shame. They were phenomenal! That’s what I was brought up on” (McLean 2006).

In the early years of the twentieth century, the Aborigines in the cattle industry in the Northern Territory were regarded as childlike by their white bosses. Ann McGrath draws attention to the many instances when they exploited this notion by suddenly going walkabout without any reason. In fact, the reason was their refusal to see work for White people as the sole priority in life. She remarks how they often saw the funny side of things and liked to do things in their own way and when they felt like it. She also brings to our attention that they sometimes used the conscious ploy of dumbness by evading certain types of responsibilities and that their childish or infantile behaviour was “rational, meaningful and

mature and a form of conscious accommodation” (McGrath 1987:146).

A station manager reported that his first experience with Aboriginal stockmen was startling but he soon got used to their antics. They were wonderful stockmen in their own peculiar way and were always laughing. They always “tried out” new bosses and, when a new head stockman arrived at a Vestey Station, they made sure that nothing went smoothly at his first branding session (McGrath 1987:96).

During the years of segregation in the twentieth century, Marie Reay (1945), R. Fink (1957) and Jeremy Beckett (1958, 1964) noticed rebellious behaviour by Aborigines living on the fringes of rural towns in New South Wales. This was their response to oppressive conditions, fomented by racism, and was especially manifested in a defiant style of drinking. Attwood, in commenting on the anger Aboriginal men felt when they had been drinking, explains that alcohol served to release their repressed hostility to the colonists which was usually controlled through fear of the white man (Attwood 1989:110). Fink and Reay found that drunkenness conferred prestige, as in Reay’s account of two Aborigines boasting competitively of their contempt for an unjust law and the lack of shame associated with imprisonment (Reay 1945:300).

Gillian Cowlshaw refers to the cultural responses of Aborigines to their lives under racism and segregation as “oppositional culture.” She perceives that, while depression and destructive drinking had been common, there was also humour and warmth, and “a sharp, cynical intelligence which saw clearly the nature of the perpetual harassment.” She asserts that: “Oppositional culture takes pride in flouting the mores of the oppressors” (Cowlshaw 1988:97). She illustrates this, stressing that when husbands, boyfriends or kin are spending the weekend in gaol on a drunk and disorderly charge, the oppositional culture makes a virtue of such events and makes fun of them. She believes that in rejecting the humiliation of being gaoled they are making a statement that they have not conformed and surrendered to white hegemony (Cowlshaw 1988:99).

During the years of segregation, it was illegal for Aborigines to drink alcohol. This gave their drinking practices many distinctive features. Aborigines were

denied entry to that shrine of mateship, the pub; accordingly, many became mendicants at the back door, or begged from a workmate — someone with citizenship rights, or relatives whose Whiteness allowed them entry. Police harassment and constant surveillance of camps was a constant fact of life. Beckett relates the amusing story of one man in flight from the police who drained his bottle of port as he ran. When he had emptied it he stopped and throwing it away, declared: “Alright, now you can take me” (Beckett 1958:39). Beckett found that drinking activities provided a core around which a new and distinctive folk-lore developed, “which entailed the excitement of getting the alcohol, running the gauntlet of the police, risking gaol and sneaking into the bush to imbibe with a great deal of noise and flourish” (Beckett 1958:42).

Albert Holt’s account of obtaining alcohol during the days of segregation when Aborigines were forbidden to enter hotels or to consume alcohol provides an amusing addition to Beckett’s observations. Holt relates the following story about life in Murgon, a small rural town in Queensland:

Just across the road from Teirman’s hotel they would group together under this pepperina tree and wait for someone to buy alcohol for them. They had a lot of success with the hotel yardsman. He took pity on the Murris and would buy them whatever they could afford. The yardman stopped ... this left them without a captain (a person who could buy drinks). The men decided to try to fool the publican by sending one of their group over. George was selected because he looked like a South African but the publican recognised him: “you’re an Abo from Cherbourg mission.” (Holt 2001:18)

Holt continues his account revealing that the next person the group selected to front up to the publican was Dave who had Chinese features. This ruse worked. The publican served him whatever he wanted and the group was “over the moon” with Dave’s success until Dave was so drunk that he “blew his cover saying he was no fucking Chinaman” (Holt 2001:18).

Cowlshaw sees the oppositional culture as “a defiant reaction to rejection, and a haven from the indignities meted out to them” (Cowlshaw 1988:232). She stresses that the oppositional culture has a highly-developed humour which reinterprets events that might otherwise ruin their lives. The culture has its own distinctive vocabulary and patterns of interpersonal interaction. Mimicry of

whites and their habits is a well-developed form of entertainment among Aborigines of oppositional culture (Cowlshaw 1988:243). Beckett records that memorable sprees were celebrated in songs and stories and the whole business described in an elaborate set of cant terms and catch phrases. The songs recorded by Beckett in 1957 in Wilcannia, NSW, provide an insight into the realities of Aboriginal life, and into the spirit of their response which was both cynical and defiant. The pleasures of drinking are described as a release from pain as the following song reveals:

The people in town just run us down
They say we live on wine and beer,
But if they'd stop and think
If we didn't drink
There'd be no fun around here.

Many songs such as the one quoted below depict the running battle with the police and the suffering in police cells.

No sugar in your tea
No smokes to ease your mind
You're camping on an old floor mat
The concrete for your bed
You feel your belly pinching
And you wish you were dead.

Beckett notes that Aborigines accepted that the price they must pay for a drink and getting drunk was ill-treatment by the police. He adds that "self-pity is not an Aboriginal vice" (Beckett 1958:42). Beckett offers various examples of the oppositional culture mentioned earlier by Cowlshaw. He claims that "they would make up a song about anything — rainmaking, catching porcupine, a lost child, and when the white man appeared they made up a song about him. When the white manager sent his Aboriginal men to a distant paddock, while he returned to fornicate their women, there was a song about that" (Beckett 1958: 40).

Julie Carter, in her field studies on the south coast of New South Wales, observed that Aborigines dealt with labels given to them by the wider community by embracing rather than denying them. She found that the terms "Black bastard"

and “lazy Blackfellow” were frequently used in the conversations of adults and children (Carter 1988:73). Anne K. Eckermann identifies the incorporation of derogatory racial remarks as typical of Aboriginal social life. “From earliest toddler-hood, children are made aware of terms like ‘Black boong’ and ‘Black fellow’ (Eckermann 1977: 300). “Teasing by adults and siblings ensures that a child never forgets that he or she is Aboriginal.” Teasing also prepares them for the kind of derogatory remarks they are likely to encounter in the outside world. Carter claims that idioms of stigma inure children to hurtful racial interaction with whites; and she refers to teasing as a strategy for managing social identity (Carter 1988:73). Erving Goffman describes in detail the strategies adopted to manage different categories of “spoiled identity” (Goffman 1964:32–40). The ritualised teasing of children can be seen as a mechanism for the management of stigma; and it sets in train a process of strengthening the corporate identity of Aboriginal people.

Carter discusses and records various idioms of speech which mark cultural identity. Such phrases as the following are a reminder of group membership:

Stop or I’ll smack your black butt;
I will/won’t kiss your black arse;
Am I too Black to go with you? (1988:73)

In identifying idioms of cultural style she points out an example where the readiness to travel at short notice with minimal baggage is considered the “Blackfellow way.” Adopting certain behaviours such as drinking and swearing with other Aborigines is often considered “mixing it with them,” the implication being that these behaviours are characteristic of Aborigines. When a member of the group asks for help in the household, insights about their socio-economic marginality are articulated in idioms of category, such as “I am not your Black slave.” Carter found that sometimes these stereotypes incorporated references to pre-contact Aboriginal lifestyle in drawing attention to the historical differences of their culture. When a debate over housing allocation became heated, the following threat brought laughter and eased the tension: “Go bush and live in a mia-mia and eat goanna like a real Blackfellow” (Carter 1988:75).

Goffman’s analysis of idioms of stigma indicate that stigmatised identity and the

inversion of meanings associated with idioms of reproach, expose the absurdity of ethnocentric biases associated with race. An example of this is when Aborigines trick non-Aborigines in some way. Carter explains that they do this with the belief that they are sharper and more quick-witted, and that tricking confirms this. Tricks can be minor and involve manipulation of information in order, for example, to rent a house or receive assistance, or to have someone “shout a drink” out of turn.

Carter explains such tricks as reversing the picture that Aborigines understand non-Aborigines to have of them: a picture of their being “uneducated, not very bright and easily taken in.” Tricking is, in actuality, a joke against non-Aborigines and is an attempt at mocking the stereotypes they have about Aborigines and their habit of making fools of them; tricking is particularly clever because the victims often fail to realise that it is they who are uneducated and easily manipulated (Carter 1988:75). Tricking, by a process of inverting stigma, helps to consolidate Aboriginal identity. It is one of the ways by which Aborigines live their social lives with some self-respect; and how they come to terms with themselves as a minority group in Australia. If, as Sennett and Cobb state, “dignity is as compelling a human need as food and sex” (1993:141), then one over-arching strategy for “powerless and oppressed groups is to create their own area of dignity” (Cowlshaw 1988: 97).

Family Humour

The following anecdotes are drawn from the stories of my own family. They illustrate how they, along with many other Aboriginal people, had to cope with White domination. My family stories begin at the end of the protection era and continue into the years of segregation and assimilation. The history of protection, segregation and assimilation is the background to the social situation of Aborigines today. It is a history that lies behind the fates of the members of my family and their life experiences.

My father was the product of the brutality he endured in a boys’ home. Although possessed of Aboriginal origins, he had fair skin and grey/blue eyes. When his

mother died, he and his two brothers were left to their own devices while their step-father was at work. When their neighbours complained that they were getting into mischief, the authorities declared them neglected children and placed them in an institution. My father told my mother (who related his story to me when I grew up), about the wretched life of daily cruelty which was meted out to him every day. At age fourteen, he was “stated out” to a station owner. This meant that he was not free to come and go until he was eighteen; and if he should abscond, the police would return him to the station owner. He belonged to the state; hence the phrase “stated out.” At the station he was forced to work harder than a grown man. Although when I knew him as my father he was a strong, well-developed man with a good physique, at age fourteen he was very slightly built and small in stature. I will not go into all the details of his suffering at the hands of the station owner; two examples will suffice.

The first was when he was required to fill the wood box in the kitchen. As he walked past the lady of the house, who was ironing at the time, she branded him with the smoothing iron. I saw this mark on his upper arm and it was a dreadful ugly scar in the shape of an iron base. The second was when he was made to break in a wild horse. He was only fourteen and inexperienced. He probably had little to do with horses in the boys’ home and, not surprisingly, he was thrown to the ground and knocked unconscious. He awoke a few days later on a bed of straw in the stable. Apart from providing this basic shelter, on the straw, nothing else was done for him. He received no medical attention.

My father tried to avoid conflict in his life, preferring to joke and laugh to ease the tension. Being a peace-loving man with a keen sense of humour and a quick wit, he was able to cope with the adversities in his life, although he often sought solace in alcohol and the company of drunks. He brightened the lives of his friends and relatives with stories about ordinary everyday happenings but the stories always had a humorous twist. Even the stories about his experiences in gaol created much laughter. He was often arrested and gaoled overnight for no other reason than being in town after sundown. The police sergeant and his two constables would belt him around the cell for boxing practice. The sergeant once quipped to my mother: “My word, that husband of yours can use himself.” When

my mother repeated this to my father, he gave a wry smile and remarked: "Oh he should know, they get enough practice on me; but they stop when their arms get tired."

Albert Holt was similarly a victim of police brutality. He writes: "The police used us as punching bags whenever they felt like it ... I was arrested more often and got more of a touch up in the cells than anyone else" (Holt 2001:103). Alexis Wright lampoons the police in her novel *Carpentaria* (2008). In this text, the Indigenous people are in the majority and the policeman, Truthful, is a minor player in the everyday life of the community, so he is an outsider dealing with a different culture. In the event of a fire at the local rubbish dump, his investigations were scuttled with feigned ignorance, non-verbal or monosyllabic answers. It was all a grand demonstration of duping him (Wright 2006: 29). There will be further discussion of this novel later in the thesis.

I never heard my father complain about his lot in life; he just got on with it. In the early 1930s he was the star player in the local rugby league team. The year his team won the Grand Final, it was widely declared that he won that game for them with his extraordinary prowess. After the match, he could not join his team mates in celebration at the local hotel because Aborigines were not allowed in hotels, or even to drink alcohol, so he stood behind the fence at the back of the hotel and his team mates sneaked a beer to him from time to time. The police would have turned a blind eye on this occasion. He laughed and said he was with them in spirit as they celebrated. This is how it was in those days and those things were simply accepted. Humour and alcohol were his good friends.

Aborigines were relegated to a place in White society where it was deemed they should stay, and if they strayed into Whites-only areas, they were swiftly put back in their place. Cheryl Harris describes this as follows: "The possessors of whiteness were granted the legal right to exclude others from the privileges of inherited whiteness; whiteness became an exclusive club whose membership was closely and grudgingly guarded ... the courts protected whiteness as any other form of property" (Harris 1993:1736). Harris's remarks about Whiteness as property can be related to an anecdote about my brother.

Peter, who in his early teens had to cope with overt racism, characteristic of small towns, such as the one in which we lived, where prejudices were rife, was a victim of continual harassment and bullying by the town pugilist, a young White man named Dick. Dick and his cohorts bullied Peter at school so the situation had a long-running history. Since we were the only Aborigines in that small town, Peter was an easy mark. The situation reached flashpoint on a night when Peter happened to be in a "Whites only" area.

In fact, he and an uncle by marriage were outside the local dance hall watching the people dancing inside through a window, though they were mainly interested in listening to the music. The bullying and racial taunts in which Dick and his cohorts specialised turned to violence with Peter and Uncle being assaulted. Peter appealed to our father for support. Together, they issued a challenge to Dick and company for a fair fight at the end of the bridge the next morning. Dick accepted the challenge with alacrity declaring to all and sundry that he would knock the possum out of them.

On that eventful morning, the first combatant faced our father, a clever strategy by Dick to test the waters, as it were, before he declared himself. Our father gave him such a rude awakening with a brisk, short, sharp punch to the face, stomach and chest, that he fell in a crumbling heap in a matter of seconds. When it was his turn to face my father, Dick dissolved into tears and wound himself around the steering wheel of his car, refusing to get out despite Peter's taunts and mockery. Our father would not fight a man until he stood up so the whole affair resulted in only a brief skirmish. It was all a sweet victory for Peter who did not have any more trouble with Dick from then on.

This event became folklore in our family. For years after, Peter regaled us with his description of that day. He was a great actor and he enacted the scene over and over many times. He mimicked the way people spoke, what they said, their expressions of surprise and fear and, best of all, was his demonstration of those short little punches which our father had delivered. We were always highly entertained, despite the number of times we had seen his re-enactment. My brother Peter was a great entertainer who thrived on a good yarn. He had a wealth of humorous anecdotes at his fingertips. His powers of observation were

sharp. He could imitate people's mannerisms and voices accurately. It was uncanny to witness such a special gift of mimicry. While Peter often felt ostracised by Whites, he found acceptance with some, and with other Aborigines for whom humour was a life-raft, making life tolerable. Sadly, as did many Aboriginal men, he found temporary solace for all hurts in alcohol which tragically became the source of his physical destruction.

Unlike my brother, my mother did not excel at mimicry. Instead, she made good use of irony and cynicism and a wry sense of humour. She exhibited clear insight into people's behaviour and often had us smiling at her remarks. My brother Peter and I always enjoyed a laugh at her expense, especially her high regard for the British Empire. When we were at school, our mother had to front up to the headmaster who was giving us a hard time. The headmaster accosted us at the front gate of his house saying: "Yes, Mrs Duncan, what can I do for you?" Stamping her foot, and clenching her fists in defiance, she replied, "I am here for British Justice!" My brother and I laughed for many years afterwards about that incident. He would mimic our mother's defiant stance and her terse words and the stunned look on the headmaster's face when she answered his question. We frequently ended up in tears of mixed amusement and pity for our mother's undying faith in "British Justice" which was never apportioned to us during those years of our childhood.

Like my mother, my Aunt Min had to go into service in the rich homes of the landed gentry at a very young age. Despite the harshness of her virtual slave labour, she acquired excellent homemaking skills. When our parents separated, my mother had to leave us in Aunt Min's care while she worked as a live-in domestic, there being no social benefits available at that time. Aunt Min always had an apt proverb to throw at us, whatever the occasion. In our adult years my siblings and our cousins would marvel at the extensive repertoire of sayings and cautionary tales that she employed, to teach us right from wrong. When we were disappointed or glum, her favourite saying was: "Every cloud has a silver lining." If we were wilful and complained about the consequences, she would chant: "You made your bed; now you must lie in it." If we were dismayed with hand-me-down clothes or disappointed with the miserly payment for some menial

task that we did for the townsfolk, she would inform us: "Beggars can't be choosers." And so the list of her many sayings went on. But in Indigenous people's historical interaction with an imposed British culture, a wry and dry resistant irony is habitually involved in the interchange.

In "Aunty Ellen: The Pastor's Wife" (1985), Diane Barwick's account of Aunty Ellen is painfully reminiscent of my Aunt Min, my mother and the other Aboriginal women of my childhood, who like Aunty Ellen, struggled to keep their families together. Barwick describes Aunty Ellen as follows and it could be any one of the women who nurtured me:

She was a widowed grandmother coping with illness, poverty and isolation in a small town where the prejudices of teachers, employers, landlords and officials still shaped the fortunes of her family and friends. Her role as mother and fond grandmother were superficially like those of other elderly women in the town. But her Aboriginal identity set her apart: her life chances had been determined by government policy decisions made before she was even born. Her opportunities like those of her ancestors and descendants, were limited by other Australians' intolerance of cultural differences, by their poor opinion of Aboriginal capacities. (Barwick 1985:175)

It can be said, too, that Whiteness was a critical factor in setting Auntie Ellen and my Aunt Min apart from White society. As mentioned earlier, Whiteness was a property that affirmed the superiority of Whites and the inferiority of Blacks. "Only whites possessed whiteness, a highly valued and exclusive form of property" (Harris 1993:1724).

Many Aborigines tried to escape the stigma of being Black by "passing" as White. Harris clarifies why this activity became an option for Black Americans and her statements are relevant in discussing the Aboriginal experience. She writes:

There are many who crossed the color line never to return. Passing is well known among Black people in the U.S. and is a feature of race subordination in all societies structured on white supremacy... The persistence of passing is related to the historical and continuing pattern of white domination and economic exploitation that has given passing a certain economic logic. It was a given to my grandmother that being White automatically ensured higher economic returns ... political and social security ... therefore survival. Becoming White increased

the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination. (Harris 1993: 1712–13)

Some examples from my family were sources of great merriment for us at the time. Exemption laws existed in the 1920s and 1930s, providing Indigenous people with citizenship papers or a certificate to state that they were exempt from the "Protection Act." I do not remember my family members having such documents in their possession and surmise they were not enforced in northern New South Wales at that time. My uncle and aunt were deemed "quarter caste" and wanted to pass as White, and their avoidance behaviour was of their own choosing. Our aunt, who aspired to become assimilated into the White community, chose to disown her relatives. She lived with her children in the White part of our little town. But it was difficult to survive in those days without the support of kin and the White people never accepted her. She was forced to visit us from time to time to borrow food or money, but her visits were mainly made at night so the townsfolk would not see her mixing with us. If she visited during the day, she would sneak along the river until she came to our stepping stones which would allow her to cross over to our home on the other side of the river. She did this in preference to crossing the bridge and walking down the road to our house where the townsfolk could see her.

One day, when she arrived at the river, it was in flood. Undeterred, she prevailed upon a family friend to ride his horse across while leading another horse for her. By this time the word had spread and all our family were standing on the other side of the river to witness the crossing, for this was a gala event for us. She had no sooner sat in the saddle, when the horse bucked her off into a heap of loose river stones. We were highly amused and found the incident to be the best entertainment we had had in a long time. Not surprisingly, this became part of our folklore which we laughed about and handed down to our children. We considered that what had happened to her was divine retribution, and our response was: "That would teach her to shun us and pretend to the White community that she did not belong to us." This aunt and her family eventually moved away to a town where they were not previously known and were able to

pass as White. My cousins secured good jobs and married outside their Aboriginal heritage and, accordingly, were able to gain access to privileges that “materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and, therefore, survival” (Harris 1993:1713).

An uncle of ours also aspired to passing himself off as White. He took extreme care of his clothes and manners and was exceptionally proud of his appearance. He took great pains to avoid Aborigines and would never let the White community see him fraternising with them. Of course he was never accepted by the White community, and eventually returned to the fold where he became a most quarrelsome and obnoxious drunk. Most self-respecting Aborigines tended to avoid him. My brother saw the humour in this outcome and said to me: “Once he ran away from the Black fellows, now they run away from him when they see him coming.” The uncle did not succeed in passing and eventually returned to the fold, as it were.

As recorded by Carter and others, Aborigines often joked at the expense of White people. Two occasions come to mind as I reminisce on my childhood. The first concerns a German man who spoke only passable English. He often passed through our paddock to get to the town common to hunt rabbits with his two dogs. He once asked my two young aunties to tell him Aboriginal names for his dogs. They gave him the names Vagina and Testicles in the lingo of that area. This man often stopped by our home on his return from hunting, and many times he gave Aunt Min a rabbit which was a treat for us during those Depression years. When he called his dogs to take his leave of us, my two young aunties would collapse in helpless laughter but strangely enough, he did not seem to notice their mirth and this was cause for even greater laughter from the rest of us.

The second occasion of our family’s deriving amusement at the expense of Whites concerned an illiterate woman who lived further up the road from us. She was sadly lacking in domestic skills and had the reputation of being the town gossip. My mother and Aunt Min were very critical of the state of her house and her lack of finesse. In those days bread was delivered to the homes and since she lived some distance from the road, this lady fixed a bread box to

her gate post by the road-side for the baker to place her order. One day she was out of town so she had nailed up a notice which read, "No bred for Tuffrey." When my mother saw it she said it was dead right, and that "Mrs Tuffrey" had no breeding. We all laughed about that notice for years. Today it is a saying in our family. When we run out of bread we exclaim loudly: "No bread for Tuffrey." This provides the stimulus for much laughter. Outsiders would no doubt wonder what was funny. This lady would get us to read and write her letters for her. Later my aunts would unkindly reveal those details that they had found amusing. This lady was one of several White women my family interacted with during the 1930s and 1940s particularly on wash days when they all did their laundry on the riverbank. I remember clearly how the womenfolk in my family laughed in derision at their ignorance and poor homemaking skills. Our women were superior in all respects, having a good education for that point in time by attending the station school where their father worked and having served their apprenticeships in the homes of the landed gentry. They knew all about homemaking and decorum in the everyday presentation of self. But they were not White and this set the White women above them. Again this illustrates Whiteness as property and a prized asset. These White ladies lorded it over us but we had the last laugh, and I wonder what they would have thought if they had known they were regarded with derision and amusement.

During the Depression years around the 1930s, jobs were scarce and Aborigines were the last people to score paid work so they often went hungry. My uncle Steve recounted this experience to us and, although I was a child at the time, I still remember it and have a chuckle. My uncle and two other Aboriginal men entered a property without permission and killed a sheep. They had almost finished skinning the animal when the squatter appeared driving his truck. They were caught red-handed! As the truck got closer they noticed that his new young wife from the city was with him. Panic disintegrated when one of the men quickly pulled his trousers down and aimed his bare buttocks at the oncoming car. The squatter promptly turned the vehicle around and drove away. Apparently the loss of a sheep was nothing compared to sparing the delicate sensibilities of his young wife. In other words, he did not want her to see a bare Black bum. This was a clever ploy to outwit the Squatter, and amazingly quick

thinking in response to almost certain disaster. The three partners in crime collapsed in laughter as we did afterwards when my uncle, always a good storyteller, related this event to us.

My Aunt Norah worked for a White family from when she was twelve years old. She did all the menial tasks around the farm which entailed strenuous yard work and heavy lifting. She fed the pigs, cows and fowls, often carrying heavy buckets of water and food for them. She always did her chores at a fast trot; my mother said she trotted like a fox. She was never paid any wages apart from food and old clothes, and her sleeping quarters were squalid. But she idolised those people and vigorously defended them when we tried to get justice for her. The only way we could deal with her utter subordination was to find humour in it. There were many humorous stories circulating in our family about her blind love for this family who repaid her with merciless exploitation of her vulnerability. Her mistress allowed her to visit us for brief periods. She always arrived with scant possessions and no money. This meant that Aunt Min or my Mother had to pay for her tickets to the movies and the annual rural show, or the circus if it was in town. This was not easy to do as we all faced real hardship in making ends meet. Many years later we discovered that the mistress did indeed give her a stingy allowance when she embarked on these visits but she returned the money unspent to her mistress when she returned.

Summary

The social condition of Aboriginal people was deplorable by most standards of natural justice. Aborigines were rendered powerless by White oppression and racist institutions. They had nothing left to resist the dominance of European culture except the weapons of the weak, the most useful being their sense of humour.

As Aborigines gradually gained access to the dominant education system, they have used its skills to speak out against their unjust treatment in this country, and like Black American humour, Aboriginal humour as a hidden transcript of

the relations between Black and White Australia has become more visible. This was helped by the social revolutions in Western countries for freedom and justice for everybody in the late 1960s. Aborigines took advantage of this phenomenon by starting to write, and managed increasingly to get their writing published. They used this new weapon to speak for themselves and to inform both Black and White readers. At last, the Indigenous people of Australia had broken free of the culture of silence and set about achieving empowerment. The next chapter details the use of humour in writing autobiography and fiction, stage productions and in theatre performances.

CHAPTER 4: HUMOUR IN BLACK LITERATURE

All our children are grown now and raised and we sit and talk about the past and wonder what things would have been like if we were born rich instead of dirt poor and Black as well, but I honestly think the rich couldn't have had as much fun and laughter as we've had — even our losses, and still come out smiling. (Langford 1988:221)

In her autobiographical novel, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), Ruby Langford Ginibi's determination not to appear as victim leads her reader to the seemingly comfortable closure of the above quotation – despite that her life was never easy. Nevertheless, humour is present throughout the novel, as Langford Ginibi noted in an interview with Janine Little, "Aboriginal humour is our survival mechanism" (Little 1994:111; see also Ferrier, "Ruby Langford Ginibi and the Practice of Auto/biography"). Langford Ginibi's language and jokes, such as using the term "the gubbament" ("gubba" meaning white), illustrates the link between the everyday use of humour (as described in the previous chapter) and Aboriginal humour as it is expressed in literature, and its role as a strategy for coping with oppression which forms the basis for this chapter. That Langford Ginibi's novel was subsequently adapted for the stage by Eamon Flack and Leah Purcell, and performed at the Belvoir Theatre between November 2012 and January 2013, extends this link to Black Theatre which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Here I argue that the breakthrough to literacy in English, as the language of the dominant culture, has been transposed by Aboriginal writers seeking to produce an Aboriginal literature. In this way, speaking English "like a native" ironically creates a discourse distinct from White Australian literature, and at the centre of this is a distinctively Aboriginal humour. First, this chapter will investigate the origins and emergence of an Aboriginal literature as a means of empowerment, and its significance in overcoming the culture of silence described by Paulo Freire. It will show how the acquisition of literacy in English, through access to education, has been vital to this process. It will then focus on the power that has

been exercised through the mobilisation of humour in Black literature, in a process of eroding a culture of silence, of strengthening identity, and empowering Aboriginal people.

Overcoming a Culture of Silence: Aboriginal Literacy

In 1972, Freire wrote that the illiterate are marginalised from the dominant society in which they live, and are submerged in a “culture of silence of the dispossessed.” The developmental patterns of Aboriginal education are characterised by four broad periods of government policies. These periods are described successively: as protection which began in 1830; segregation which lasted from 1860 until 1940; assimilation which lasted from 1940 until 1970, and integration which is still ongoing. Since 2001, Australian governments have favoured a policy of Reconciliation, and on 13 February 2008, Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd formally apologised to Australia's Aboriginal people, in particular the Stolen Generation.

Throughout the periods when the protection, segregation and assimilation policies of the Australian government were being implemented, Aborigines were submerged in a culture of silence, a silence that has persisted and adversely impacted Aboriginal culture throughout the time span of White European contact. During assimilation, despite the “oppositional culture” previously described, Aborigines generally remained marginalised and powerless. They were relegated to this social situation not only because they were Black; they were also illiterate, and therefore they were silenced within dominant discourses. As a consequence, they were prevented from participating in the dominant society and even in the transforming their own. Nevertheless, oral communication with their own people enabled Aboriginal culture and tradition to be communicated and re-interpreted.

Long before Aborigines began to engage in a widespread way in writing and have their literary works published, much had been written about them. Aborigines have been studied by European intellectuals, as central characters in a number of important origin myths developed within anthropology. For example,

anthropologists believed that they represented an early stage in the evolution of complex human societies. The works of these intellectuals have been significant in categorising Aborigines, and have been responsible for how they have been defined in the nineteenth century and for the greater part of the twentieth. Morgan (1870), Fison and Howitt (1880), Frazer (1915), Baldwin Spencer (1927), Spencer and Gillen (1899), Strehlow (1907), and Lévi-Strauss (1949) are among earlier eminent scholars who categorised and defined Aborigines.

Roger Keesing in 1981 warned his readers that Aborigines, because they were hunter/gatherers, could not be treated as windows on the ancient past and survivors from the dawn of humanity, because other cultural groups, existing in similar environments at the same time, followed different directions as a matter of choice. Still, it is significant that his research findings were at variance with those of the aforementioned research scholars.

During most of the period in which the history of Australia since 1788 has been written, Aborigines have been nearly invisible. In his 1968 Boyer Lectures, W.E.H. Stanner elaborated upon his notion of Aboriginal history as “the great Australian silence: It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape” (Stanner 1974:24). Aboriginal people “had been engulfed in a cloud of historical ignorance, born of the Eurocentric bias of most Australian historians.” According to Stanner, the past silence reinforced the marginal place of Aborigines by ignoring them. For a long time, Aborigines and Europeans did not have the same perspective regarding Black/White contact history, but the Aboriginal version was beginning to be generally circulated in the 1960s, through the efforts of Indigenous people. As Ann Curthoys noted, Stanner provided “a foreshadowing that the great Australian silence is in the process of being broken” (Curthoys 2008:234).

Scholars including Rowley (1972), Robinson and York (1977) and Reynolds (1972 to the present) were beginning to provide accounts of the contact history which had previously been hidden. As well as the works of recent historians, and oral histories of Aboriginal people, Indigenous biographies and autobiographies were now being collected and published. Bain Attwood (1989) stresses that the

most persuasive influence on scholars has been the writings of Aboriginal people themselves where family and community histories have revealed the richness of oral sources; and Aboriginal historians offer unique insights and perspectives different from those recorded by European writers, because their experiences took place mainly in isolation from Europeans. In recording the place of Aborigines in Australia, autobiography is particularly significant. As Ruby Langford Ginibi asserts, in an interview with Janine Little: "I'm not interested in fiction. Don't need to because I'm too busy with the truth about my people ... Although the history of the whole of White Australia is one of the biggest fictions aye?" (Little 1994:102).

But how did Aborigines break through the barriers to achieve standards of literacy that enabled them to write their own oral histories, biographies and autobiographies? Theirs is a classic example of Freire's model of taking the initiative in developing their own strategies, by exploiting the structures of the dominant culture to achieve empowerment through literacy.

Cultural action through relevant learning programs and affirmative action became necessities if Aborigines were to cast off the shackles of the culture of silence and open the way to a new future. Although forced increasingly to adapt to Anglo-Celtic values if they were to survive, Aborigines' access to the education system was marked by inequality of opportunity and low participation. Throughout the periods of protection, segregation and assimilation, there was very little provision of adequate schooling for Aborigines, and only in the late 1960s did some change begin. At this time educational research uncovered glaring problems, including those of under-representation of Aboriginal children in secondary schools and over-representation in slow learner classes; non-attendance at school; later starting of schooling and earlier exit than their White counterparts; lack of the knowledge and skills to compete with other Australians and poorer prospects of employment. Aboriginal adults had little contact with schools, with over half the population aged forty-five or more having no education at all (McConnochie 1982: 17).

In *Yumba Days* (1999), Herb Wharton expresses the thoughts of many Aboriginal parents at the time in regard to the importance of education: "Mum always

emphasised how important it was to learn to read and write. Like Dad she was continually stressing the importance of getting a good education” (Wharton 1999:21). The members of my family, having suffered from poor educational opportunities, always impressed on me, too, that education is a vital necessity in life.

Prior to 1967, attendance at school beyond primary school was not required for Aboriginal children, but by 1968, most Aboriginal children in Australia had access to state schools staffed by qualified teachers with basic educational facilities (Whatman 1995:36). At a national conference in 1973, a significant number of Aborigines presented their views and proposals in relation to their education. This event was the catalyst to the new era in Aboriginal education acknowledged by Juanita Sherwood, who argued that “By the mid 1970s Aboriginal education was the fastest growing and most innovatory area in the whole field of education in Australia” (Sherwood 1982:85). Nevertheless, in the 2014 “Closing the Gap” speech, while Prime Minister Tony Abbott was able to report that the target to halve the gap in Indigenous students’ Year 12 attainment by 2020 was on track, he also conceded that there had been very little improvement in the target to halve the gap in Indigenous students’ reading, writing and numeracy (Abbott 2014).

One of the most exciting things to emerge from increasing levels of literacy for Aborigines has been the transformation of oral literature into written form. Black writers have a significant role in continuing and promoting Aboriginal culture. Robert Ariss saw Aboriginal writing as a creative force contributing to public constructions of Aboriginality. He stated that the position of Aborigines has changed in Australia in the late-twentieth century through their intervention as an essential force behind those changes, and that Aboriginal discourse itself asserts an Aboriginality that is absent from White-authored constructions. In Ariss’s view this action asserted an ideology of self-determination (1988:132). He presented a similar view to that which Freire expressed when he said that the subordinate culture, by entering the public discursive realm, enhances its own cultural cohesion and political power.

In so doing it must to some extent adopt and work with the symbolic forms of the dominant culture and this position is itself a reflection of, and an assumed ideological weapon against prevailing power relations between Aborigines and European cultures. (Ariss 1988:132)

In 1929, David Unaipon's *Native Legends*, the first complete work by an Aboriginal, was published. A fore-runner of the writers of Black literature in Australia, it was not until 1964 that another Aboriginal writer, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, appeared on the scene with the publication of *We Are Going*. After this Robert Merritt's play, *The Cake Man*; Gerry Bostock's play *Here Comes the Nigger*; and Jack Davis's plays established a visible Aboriginal literature. Kevin Gilbert's political works were published in 1973 and 1978.

The title of Bostock's play has a wry, assertive irony that was a common feature of much writing of the 1960s and 70s. Humour is also apparent in Jack Davis's interview with Adam Shoemaker in 1982, in which Davis puts a humorous twist on the old axiom, "The pen is mightier than the sword," by saying: "The biro is mightier than the gun." At a conference in Perth in 1983 he also commented: "Fact remains – that the Aboriginal pen is here to stay and I fervently hope that before the nineties we will have tenfold the number of publications, by Aboriginal authors, on the bookshelves around Australia and the world" (Davis and Hodge 1985:15).

In 1983, the first National Aboriginal Writers' Conference was held at Murdoch University in Perth. The conference was an historic event with over forty Aboriginal delegates drawn from all over Australia to discuss major issues of Aboriginal literature. This was impressive, given that Aborigines were able to access post-primary standard education for only a brief two decades and, only one decade previously, Aboriginal writing had hardly existed as a significant and visible element in Australian literary and cultural life.

Kevin Gilbert notes that Aboriginal literature "is an important focus for Aboriginal pride," and he mentions Jack Davis and Oodgeroo Noonuccal as role models of success for their own people (Gilbert in Horton 1994:1062). Kevin Gilbert is himself an important addition to this list of successful role models for aspiring Aboriginal writers, and in addition he published *Inside Black Australia*,

an anthology of over forty poets, in 1988. Gilbert maintains that Aboriginal literature belongs largely to the realm of “symbolic” politics but these are more complicated than a flag or a tent outside Parliament House in Canberra. While an Aboriginal flag or an embassy tent is overt and striking, Black Australian writing is usually more subtle. “Aboriginal authors can persuade and educate the reader without the intensity of a march or a demonstration, even though the aims may be identical.” Jack Davis et al. in their Introduction to *Paperbark*, an anthology of Black Australian writings, comment that “literature is one of the ways of getting political things done” (Davis 1990:2). Gilbert’s comments signal an explanation of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy outside Parliament House in Canberra, from Australia Day in 1972. The name “embassy” was used “to symbolise the feelings of many Aboriginal people that they were ‘foreigners in their own country as long as they had no legal freehold to any part of Australia’” (Gilbert in Horton 1994:1062). The irony of adopting the title, Embassy, was typically found in both the political discourses of the Black Power and Land Rights movements, as well as much of the literary writing of the time. With the 2008 publication of Anita Heiss and Peter Minter’s *PEN Macquarie Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, I think we can safely say that Jack Davis’s hope, expressed in 1983, continues to be realised, with Indigenous writing gaining canonical acceptance, even though the *Paperbark* editors commented in 1990: “Aboriginal writing, like Uluru – two-thirds of which is hidden underground – is still largely unknown to most Australians” (Davis 1990:6).

In Aboriginal literature, the essential differences or dissimilarities between Black and White Australians are often stark. According to Gilbert, despite cooperation in many areas, these differences do exist. Jack Davis made an insightful comment when he remarked to Shoemaker: “The assimilation policy never could have worked because there will always be differences between Black and White.” These differences operate in a particular way within a particular society. Black and White skins do not mean fixed relationships in any society imaginable and there are many differences between Black people. Aboriginal literature explores the positive side of this, including the resilience and the vitality of the Black Australian experience, and it is marked by a fortitude embodied pervasively in a laconic and frequently ironic humour.

Above all, Aboriginal literature is involved with the maintenance and enhancement of Aboriginal self-confidence and feelings of self-worth. Gilbert points out that many Black Australian authors highlight examples of Black success through their own literary achievements. He identifies three major elements of Black Australian literature: cultural nationalism, literary talent and Aboriginal pride.

Adam Shoemaker considered, in 1989, that the diversity of Aboriginal literary perspectives was best illustrated by poetry. Whether published in popular Australian periodicals such as the *Bulletin*, or in local or regional Aboriginal community publications such as Land Council Newsletters, poetry has attracted more Black Australian authors than any other mode of creative writing. Black poetry often includes explicit political commentary, and reflects on issues such as Aboriginal health, education, legal matters or government policies.

This political commentary can clearly be seen in an early poem by Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), “Black Commandments”

1. Thou shall gather thy scattered people together.
2. Thou shall work for Black liberation.
3. Thou shall resist assimilation with all thy might.
4. Thou shall not become a Black liberal in a white society.
5. Thou shall not uphold White lies in a Black society.
6. Thou shall take back the land stolen from thy forefathers.
7. Thou shall meet White violence with black violence.
8. Thou shall remove thyself from a sick White society.
9. Thou shall find peace and happiness in a stable Black society.
10. Thou shall think Black and act Black.
11. Thou shall be Black all the rest of thy days.

The poem, found by Aidee Watego while researching his PhD thesis in the Fryer Library and published in *Hecate* in 1983 (Watego 2008; Walker 1983:141), clearly calls for Black resistance, and advocates countering the White policy of Assimilation with Separationism. The form in which the poem is presented is a blasphemous appropriation of the biblical Ten Commandments, one that frames its dictates as “Thou shall” rather than “Thou shalt not,” and looks forward to “peace and happiness in a stable Black society” (9). In ironically making use of scripture, Walker humorously points out the distance between Christian values

and White actions, as well as rejecting the traditional Black/White binary and revaluing Black as the opposite to a “sick White society” (8).

Like Walker/Oodgeroo, Jack Davis has also made a long contribution to Aboriginal politics and cultural expression. His poems have been described by John Beston as sincere and honest, the “gentlest and most contained” (qtd. Shoemaker 1989:190). A number of his poems were composed in the aftermath of socio-political events affecting Aborigines. His “Laverton Incident,” for example, was written in the wake of a police shooting of a young Aborigine, Raymond Watson, after a dispute at a Western Australian pub. “In Desolation” he writes:

We are tired of the benches, our beds in the park.
We welcome the sundown that heralds the dark.
White Lady Methylate!
Keep us warm and from crying.
Hold back the Hate.
And hasten the dying.
(Davis qtd. Shoemaker: 1989: 191)

Like “Black Commandments,” Davis’s poem also has an ironically religious tone in its appeal to “White Lady Methylate” – the cheap methylated spirits which many Aborigines drink as a form of cheap alcohol. The poem showcases the bitter irony of the hopeless situation in which many Aborigines were enveloped, and offers little solution other than death. In looking back on my childhood I remember references to methylated spirits by various “code” names, such as: “I have my white lady to keep me warm,” “Do you have any news about the white lady?” or “Did you meet up with the white lady while you were in town?” Likewise wine was sometimes given a female title. When I asked my niece about the absence of her husband she replied that he was with his girlfriend, Mrs Penfold. This ironic name expressed her bitterness at the hopeless inadequacy of her alcoholic husband. It helped her cope with the pain. These idioms of speech were always accompanied by interaction ritual such as explicit body language, smiling and winking with emphasis on certain words.

The Role of Humour in Black Literature

Although Aboriginal poetry is mainly political in content, sending messages about racism, poverty, pride in identity or confronting government policies, there is some primarily humorous poetry. These examples show how Indigenous poets use humour effectively as a political tool.

W. Les Russell in his poem, “God Gave Us Trees to Cut Down,” satirises a feature of the government situation in the Joh Bjelke-Petersen era of Queensland politics. The words and opinions of this Premier are openly caricatured in these verses:

My goodness ...
And why should they cut down their trees?
What use are they? Well I'll tell you:
The Japanese – I know they're a funny mob of people —
But they make paper out of trees, see,
And we all need paper.
You know this – what a stupid question to ask.
What would you do without paper and cardboard and –
Goodness, I ask you.
Of course we must cut down trees:
Golly what did God give them to us for?
(Gilbert 1988: 4–6)

The assumption of the poem, that the Australian landscape is a gift from God to White Australia to be commodified and used as required can also be read as a reflection of White Australia's attitude to Aborigines as something to be used or disposed of in the pursuing of White interests.

Similarly, it is with joyful sarcasm that Eva Johnson describes, in “Weevilly Porridge,” the almost inedible mission food rationed to Aborigines:

Weevilly porridge I'm going insane
Weevilly porridge gonna wreck my brain
Stir in treacle, make'em taste sweet
Put'em on stove, turn'em up heat
Milk from powder tin, milk from goat
Weevilly porridge, pour'em down throat
MmmMmm, mission food, send'em from heaben must be good
MmmMmm, mission food, send'em from heaben must be good
(Johnson in Gilbert 1988:33)

The repetition of “Weevilly porridge” and the mock pidgin of the “-em” verb endings clearly signals the poem’s humorous purpose but, once again, the poem connects Aboriginal experience with Christian purpose, associating the awful “Weevilly porridge” with the notion that anything sent “from heaben” is good and undercutting the joke with serious critique. The last verse of her poem expresses glee:

Protector he bin call on us give daily ration
Cook’em plenty food for him, together we bin mash’em
Weevils in the sago, weevils in the rice
Protector he bin lunga saying – Mmmm, taste nice.

Retaliation and delicious revenge is achieved in the climax of the poem when the “ignorant” Aborigines fool the “clever” White Protector into himself consuming the weevils.

In the years of segregation and assimilation many Aboriginal women faced difficult and conflicting roles. They usually nurtured large numbers of children, had to meet the needs of husbands or partners and often experienced domestic violence. Servitude in White homes consumed a large proportion of their time and often involved coping with the exploitive and sexual demands of White men. Despite all this, they generally contributed enormously to the strength of family and community ties. Some of these factors operated in the situation of my mother and my aunts, who lived lives of selflessness amid privation. So it was with delight that I encountered Maureen Watson’s two poems in a 1984 recitation, with their witty and sassy projection of a liberated Aboriginal woman welcoming integration. In “Stepping Out,” she proclaims:

I’m stepping out, don’t mess about,
Don’t tell me to be patient,
I’ve been wedded, enslaved, whitewashed, and saved,
But now I’m liberated.
(Watson in Gilbert 1988:47–48)

The poem details the multiple effects of racism and sexism on Aboriginal women. The common slang of “stepping out, don’t mess about” is juxtaposed with the declaration “I’m liberated” to map a journey of Feminist consciousness raising —

of education. The line “wedded, enslaved, whitewashed, and saved” traces both a wife’s historical position in relation to her husband, and the more literal enslavement of Aborigines to White masters, and the influence of missionaries. Her poem “Female of the Species” is in similar style. Her last verse reads:

‘Cause I like what I see, when I look at me,
And I don’t have to be what I used to be.
I can be whatever I choose to be.
So you can throw out the book on your sexist theses
‘Cause me, why I’m the female of the species.
(Watson in Gilbert ed. 1988:48–49)

Watson’s determination to “throw out the book on your sexist theses” further expands on her ideas of education — not the institutional forms of White male education with their “theses” which position the Black woman as object of inquiry — but rather a form of knowledge in which she herself can be both subject and agent, “whatever I choose to be.” This assertive subject position is emphasised by the repeated use of “I.” In 1984, she personally recited this poem in Canberra to a group of women of which I was a member. Her emphatic diction and expressive body language intensified our enjoyment of her humorous message, which is already clear in the written word.

The poem “Pension Day,” by Charmaine Papertalk Green, also conjures up vivid memories. Pension Day was a big event in my childhood because our two old grandfathers treated my siblings and me to lollies, bought items we needed for school, and provided us with spending money. Yes, they treated themselves too. There were no clubs then, and hotels were legally out of bounds. However, there were ways of obtaining alcohol and the celebrations not only included drinking and laughing but, as the poem notes, invariably also fighting:

They sit under the gumtrees
Waiting for the post office to open
Looking cleaner than any other day
Some yarn and laugh
While others sit silently
They don’t say what
They are gonna do
With their money
There’s no need

They all end up at
The club
Laughing, drinking and fighting
It's pension day.
(Papertalk Green in Gilbert ed. 1988:76)

There is quiet pathos and dry humour here – the short phrases which make up most of the lines are complete in themselves, “Some yarn and laugh” and fall into a silence at the end of each line, only to be added to in a desultory fashion in the following line, thus recreating the sense of waiting. You do not begrudge them their temporary reprieve from the drudgery of existing from one pension day to the next.

A fitting conclusion to this section is a brief discussion of “The Good Old Days,” composed by Stephen Clayton of the Wiradjiri people of New South Wales.

Back in 55, when I was just a lad
My father was a farmer
Working someone's land
Although I never knew him
I know that this is fact,
It's written on my birth certificate
Occupation — farmhand.
They call this time “The good old days”
I wonder if he'd known
He'd been working in the noon day sun
On land
His ancestors once owned.
(Clayton in Gilbert ed. 1988:119)

Clayton reveals the irony of the situation in which an Aborigine can look upon a certain time in the past as the good old days when in fact he was a virtual slave to masters who had usurped the land of his ancestors.

Shoemaker suggested that in the literature of Aboriginal authors from the 1960s to the late 1980s “the literature and actual events are very proximate: novels are extremely naturalistic ... characters are modelled to a great degree upon individuals the author has personally known, and socio-political issues are faced squarely” (Shoemaker 1989:6). This is true of the works of Marnie Kennedy (1985), James Miller (1985), Ellie Gaffney (1989), Monica Clare (1978), Mary Coe

(1989) and Ruby Langford (1988), as well as early 1990s writing by Joe McGinnis (1991) and Rita and Jackie Huggins (1994). Speaking mainly about plays, Shoemaker believes that the inspiration for Aboriginal writing is derived largely from personal experience, and that characters are often modelled on individuals known to the authors. He also argues that Black creative writing must be evaluated in terms of the particular social environment that surrounds it, and the historical events that precede it. The particular social environment contained a lot of cheerful acceptance of life's hardships and the idiosyncrasies of various role players. He notes how remarkable it is that humour pervades so much of Aboriginal writing; and that, while Aboriginal playwrights use humour extensively, "none of the plays could properly be termed a comedy." Rather, they habitually describe hardship, misery, poverty, discrimination and even death: by the same token, none of the plays is "unrelievedly sombre in tone." Indeed, for all the playwrights, "Humour tempers the seriousness", and this "rescues them from being oppressive in tone" (Shoemaker 1989:234).

Prose Fiction: Oppression and Exploitation

In his introduction to *Where Ya Been Mate* (1996), Herb Wharton writes:

Laughter plays a big part in my writing and where ever I have wandered it has always been the humour that has been a guiding light in the dark days of oppression and inequality, never despair. (Wharton 1996: iv)

This next part of the chapter will focus on humour in Aboriginal prose, examining Shoemaker's observation that a distinctive Aboriginal humour can be found. For this purpose, I examine the works of several Aboriginal authors: Bill Rosser (1985, 1990), Sally Morgan (1987,1989), Herb Wharton (1992, 1999), Ruby Langford (Ginibi) (1988), Anita Heiss (1996), Vivienne Cleven (2001), Alexis Wright (2007) and Gayle Kennedy (2007), in a discussion arranged under three headings: Oppression and Exploitation; Assimilation and Racism; and the Humorous Celebration of Life.

Shoemaker notes: "When Aboriginal people define themselves in literature, they emphasise "not just the shared experiences of oppression, but also the shared

enjoyment of life” (Shoemaker 1989:233). Outlined earlier in this thesis was the powerlessness felt by Aborigines as they worked under oppressive conditions for their White bosses in the pastoral and cattle industries of Australia. Aborigines provided cheap labour in return for tobacco, food scraps and old clothes. Sometimes these were augmented with meagre rations of flour, sugar and tea.

Bill Rosser in *Dreamtime Nightmares* (1985) writes about his discussions with old-timers during his research with a lively sprinkle of humour. These old-timers toiled from dawn until dark for their White bosses. Harry Spencer, in recollecting old times, tells an anecdote to Bill about coping in the wet season in north-western Queensland. He and his fellow workers had to muster the cattle, whatever the weather and in the wet, and they had to sleep in wet swags and endure other discomforts such as the inability to keep fires alight to cook food, to dry clothes or to keep warm: “You stayed out in the wet. When I was fourteen it was so wet that we had to sit in a tree all night. In the end we started to float.” Harry threw back his head and laughed loudly at the memory of floating through the paddock on a large log. He remarked: “We still had to watch the cattle” (Rosser 1985:92).

Ruby De Satge, another of Bill’s informants, spent a lifetime mustering and droving cattle, horse-breaking and fencing. Ruby laughed too as she recalled the dresses she and the other Aboriginal girls had to wear when they were living on the stations. Each received a dress made of blue denim stuff every six weeks for all the hard work they did on the stations. Since the older women’s days of toil were over, they were given miserly rations of tea, sugar and flour. Ruby described the dresses to Bill: “They were just like a sack bag. Square. If you took a bag, cut a piece out of it, then cut two armholes ... add a belt. We used to laugh. We used to put the dress on and waltz around the place. The old girls used to say: ‘What dress do you like today?’ And we’d laugh” (Rosser 1985:21). The irony in the question of the “old girls” is that they knew full well that there was no choice, but they liked to tease and laugh to make the best of the situation. Bill Rosser describes Ruby’s infectious laugh and says, “I was able to share the bitter humour of the situation” (Rosser 1985:21).

Bill Rosser spent his early years on Palm Island, a Queensland government reserve. When he met up with Fred, also from Palm Island, they recalled old times. When he asked Fred what the food was like in the dormitory then, Fred replied with a laugh. Bill says: "There was a certain amount of humour in that laugh but it was mostly contempt" (Rosser 1985:129).

The laugh, tinged with contempt, conveyed the message to Bill that the food was dreadful. Fred tells Bill about one of his escapades, explaining that there was a White area on Palm Island where the White staff lived but also in that same area there were three houses where Aboriginal families lived and Fred and his family lived in one of them. Curiously these three houses were gazetted as Aboriginal reserves. When Fred was having a drink with his friends, the state police arrived saying it was against the law to drink alcohol on an Aboriginal reserve. He and his mates jumped the fence into the White area and drank their beer. The police could not touch them and the White teachers did not mind their intrusion. This is but one of the many humorous examples of Aborigines out-witting the police. Rosser writes after his encounter with Fred: "My mind flew back to those bitter days on Palm Island. In 1974, when we had worked together, laughed together, and yes, sometimes we cried together as we fought for freedom from the oppressive yoke which was the Queensland Aborigines Act" (Rosser 1985:184).

In *Unbranded* (1992), Herb Wharton writes a story of three stockmen, Mulga, Bindi and Sandy, and their friendship over forty years. Wharton uses his character, Mulga, as the narrator of the story. In one instance, Mulga tells how he was on a train journey when two Aboriginal men boarded the train and sat in his compartment. It was obvious to Mulga that the two men had recently been in gaol. Mulga talks about the unjust gaol terms and unfair sentences handed out to Aborigines for minor offences, and reflects thus: "In gaol those two Murris had mixed with hardened criminals. But they talked about the humorous things that had happened to them not the brutality. It seems as though their defence against misfortune was to laugh" (Wharton 1992:84).

During a cattle muster, Mulga worked with a man named Quart-pot who came from a government mission. One day Quart-pot told Mulga the following story when he was asked about drawing money from his bank account at the mission.

When he needed money, he had to go to the office. The boss always asked the same question:

“What do you want?”

“Money from the bank.”

“What do you need it for — you’re not buying grog are you?”

“Tucker, new boots Boss.”

“Okay, how much?”

“Twenty pound.”

“Okay, I give you the money, but first you gotta sign ‘em name on this paper. What, you can’t write your name! Okay you make a cross here.”

I make em mark. Boss looks at it for a long time.

“This cross don’t look good.”

He crush ‘em paper and throw it in the wastepaper basket. He pulls out another form.

“This time you sign him proper hey?”

I make a mark same as before. Boss gives me the money but when I leaves, Boss takes the crumpled form and starts counting money for himself. But he doesn’t see the Murri girl who works for him for no wage. She’s watching from the next room and tells me everything.

(Wharton 1992: 119)

Again this is but one of the many instances of exploitation of Aborigines living on mission stations and an example of the process of stolen wages. The dishonesty of the boss, in this case, is known and well-remembered by Quart-pot. The humour here is in the boss’s ignorance and his false sense of security (although his exposure would have been unlikely).

At Mount Isa, Bindi camped with other tribal mobs. Mulga tells how they would sit around the camp fire and talk all night. Once Mulga joined them and was amazed at how they all joked about their struggles.

He thought that they must be the only people on earth who could laugh at misery and injustice. He told himself that maybe that was the key to survival. Yet Mulga was amazed how the down and out Murris could always joke and laugh about their plight. Things the White community regarded as disasters happened everyday to the Murri. Laughter was their shield, a protection against despair. (Wharton 1992: 176)

Wharton was reared in the Yumba, a fringe dwellers’ camp in south-west Queensland. Thinking back on those Yumba days he writes:

Yet even the darkest days were always somehow overcome by hope combined with the greatest gift of all against oppression – laughter, and

education – that was my key to equality, justice and deciding my own destiny. These things also gave me identity and strength. For if we cried they would have been tears of blood that flooded the Warrego River. (Wharton 1999:1)

Wharton and Rosser's texts both tell what are essentially very dark tales of oppression and injustice, yet these are consistently alleviated by humour and the company of other Aboriginal people to share the joke. This is what Jackie Huggins referred to earlier when she described Aboriginal humour as "deadly serious" (Huggins 1988: 8).

Assimilation and Racism

Aborigines had no say in the content of ethnocentric government policies but their lives were greatly affected by them, and simply had to cope; and with a great deal of humour, they succeeded. In Ida West's story of her youth on Flinders Island, *Pride Against Prejudice: Reminiscences of a Tasmanian Aborigine* (1984), she describes getting ready to attend the local dances: "We had to put on all the powder and ponds cream. You can see the funny side of it. Putting on powder to get the right shade" (1984:23). However, despite their efforts to look White, Ida and her friends often had to sit all night because they were not asked to partner anyone. Many Aboriginal women in other parts of Australia would have had the same experience of a refusal by White men to partner them — on the dance floor at a public function at least.

Another anecdote is provided by Ruby Langford Ginibi in *Real Deadly* (1992). Ruby, having been invited to participate in a writers' festival, went shopping for perfume after getting her hair styled. She was surprised to find perfume under the trade name of "Black Velvet." The name had special significance for her and also for other "urban Kooris" (ie. "Black Velvet" is the expression for a "Black gin's vagina"), and so she could not resist buying it along with her purchase of another brand called Cachet. Her friend Margaret came into her room and spying the perfume, Black Velvet on the bed burst into laughter. There was even more laughter when she mispronounced Cachet as "Catchit." Upon hearing their peals

of laughter their friend Mary stopped by and, because she had impaired hearing, Ruby and Margaret tried to communicate by pointing to their “private parts” and the Black Velvet bottle. In the end Margaret said: “You’d better be careful with that Black Velvet because you might catch it.” Ruby nearly fell off the bed as she collapsed in uncontrolled laughter, and even at tea time, they were still laughing and uttering the words Black Velvet (Langford 1992:66). This anecdote from Langford illustrates the point made in chapter one that insiders in a culture make use of interaction ritual in everyday practice; that is “their glances, looks, and postural shifts carry all kinds of implication and meaning” (Goffman 1981:1). While their mirth might seem to be for insiders, their hilarious laughter can certainly also be understood by many White readers, given the historical currency of the term.

Other examples of racism are found in Langford’s *Real Deadly* stories. In the first instance she relates how, as a teenager recently from a country town, she joined the workforce in Sydney: “There were not many places we Aboriginals could go to without running into nasty, prejudiced people. There was a picture theatre called the Lawson in Lawson Street, Redfern: there was a Blackout there every Saturday night, meaning it was full of us Aboriginal people there to enjoy the movies” (Langford 1992:16). A striking example of finding humour in living with racism is found in Ruby Langford’s *Haunted by the Past* (1999), which is the story of her son Nobby. She recounts the time he was released from prison. She says: “We arranged a rental car – near new commodore – a white car would be soon filled with us Blackfellows.” A mixture of humour and bravado is demonstrated here in the choice of a car. All three anecdotes function as a form of humorous wordplay: the double meaning of “Black Velvet,” “Blackout” and the opposition of “Blackfellas” in a white Commodore. Black and white also suggest opposites attract – or, could the message be, “we are making a statement in black and white.” Another message might be “white is not the sole property of White people.”

A similar use of humour is found in *Don’t Take Your Love to Town*. After his release, Langford recalls that Nobby needed a driver’s licence to enable him to get to work. She comments that Nobby, who was fair skinned, “paid \$300 for an

illegal licence in the name of Joseph Kalangi. That's why I was laughin'. I said to him you don't look like a Joseph Kalangi to me. That's a wog New Australian name. You're flat out trying to be known as a Koori" (Langford 1999:39).

In *Yumba Days*, Herb Wharton describes a different scenario for Aborigines attending the "pictures" in small country towns. He paints a grim picture indeed as he writes: "Most Murries would gather in darkness around the corner of the street or in the narrow alley that led to the side entrance." This is how my own family would act, too, when we attended the movies in the small country town where we lived. Wharton goes on to say: "Most were crowded in the cheap fenced-off front row canvas seats and after the movie started they would be pelted in the dark by Whites sitting in the upstairs section. Sometimes the torchlight flashed over the front rows and us Murries would be ejected on some excuse" (Wharton 1999:50). This was the appalling situation which existed in the Australian picture theatres from the early 1900s until the 1970s, and included being forced to occupy the front row canvas seats while being pelted with all sorts of litter from the White patrons in the back rows. This was a hard lesson in living with racism. The worst indignity of all for Aborigines was waiting until the lights went out so they could scurry unseen to their seats, thus avoiding jeers and derision from the back rows. It begs the question of why Aborigines put themselves through such torment.

African Americans were subjected to similar treatment in the picture theatres they attended at about the same time in history. Jacqueline Stewart, in her article, "Negroes Laughing at Themselves" (2003), examines why Black moviegoers patronised films that seemed to place them in a degrading light or did not represent them at all apart from depicting them as servants or buffoons (Stewart 2003:652). She was interested to know if Black enjoyment of such films necessarily signified a posture of self-deprecation, and points out that Black spectatorship at the movies is "typically characterized as fraught with social, psychological and political contradictions for those who were subjected to films that showcased White privilege, white (racist, hegemonic) values and perspectives" (Stewart 2003:653–54). Stewart turns to fictional accounts to explore African American responses to cinema, arguing that these texts can be

read as historicist sources (Stewart 2003:655). Pauline Breedlove, from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), for example, is a migrant from the south to Chicago, where she experienced homesickness and isolation. In the novel, she attended the movies for comfort and distraction. Stewart argues, in opposition to many film critics, that Black spectatorship can be complex and contradictory, active rather than passive, part of a "collective, urban experience" and a means of "articulating black subjectivities in the face of a host of hostile and hegemonic institutional conditions" (Stewart 2003:677). Returning to the question of why Aborigines subjected themselves to running the gauntlet of racism by attending movies especially in small rural towns, the answer could be that Aboriginal spectatorship was as complex as that experienced by Black Americans.

Another important semi-autobiographical text dealing with the response to the difficulties associated with assimilation and ongoing racism is Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987). Morgan and her siblings were brought up as non-Aborigines. They thought that they might have had Greek or Indian heritage but not Aboriginal. Both their grandmother and mother hid the truth from them for years. Their grandmother had many secrets which she took to the grave. Racism and the fear of government intervention in their lives were good reasons to try to pass as White. The assimilation policy also would have influenced them in keeping their true identity secret and in protecting the children. Sally Morgan never faltered in her search for her place. When her mother finally admitted that they were not White but Aboriginal, she responded to Sally's chagrin by saying: "It was only a white lie." Sally could not help laughing at her mother's "unintentional humour." Morgan writes: "In no time at all we were both laughing uncontrollably. It was as if a wall that had been between us suddenly crumbled away. I felt closer to Mum than I had been for years" (Morgan 1987:135). Once again, humorous wordplay (the "white" lie) and irony enable Aborigines divided by the impacts of an anti-Aboriginal culture to reconnect with each other and to subvert the pressure to conceal and disavow indigeneity through a shared sense of humour.

Wanamurraganya also includes the life story of Jack McPhee, who says that it was a puzzle to understand why he was not considered an Australian citizen. Jack says: "We used to joke about the whole thing amongst ourselves. We could

see it was silly, but not many other people thought so. We'd say things to each other, like "You eating with a knife and fork? Is your plate china and not enamel? You'd better get it right or they'll take your citizenship away." Jack tells Sally this amusing anecdote:

I remember when a friend of mine got his papers. He was a bit of a character and he came running down the main street of Marble Bar from the courthouse shouting, "I'm a White man, I just left my Black skin at the court house." By gee he funny, I laughed and laughed. Then he said to me, "Hullo White fella, you got your White skin on, too, eh? I hope you've got a silver knife, no more tin for you. No more enamel mugs, we to have china now." By gee he was silly, he made a big joke of the whole thing and I really enjoyed it. (Morgan 1989:157)

Jack goes on to tell Sally that other Aborigines would say: "Hey Jack, why do you need that dog licence? You walk on two legs not four" (Morgan 1987:157). He explained that they called their citizenship papers "dog licences" because that really seemed to be what they were.

Ruby Langford Ginibi found assimilation even less agreeable. In *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, she points out that in 1972 there were few Black families in Housing Commission homes where she lived in Green Valley, a suburb of Sydney. She felt isolated from her culture and friends. She also regretted the government policy of placing Aboriginal families alone in White areas. Her culture was one of sharing and support for each other, and this was not possible there. In her neighbourhood, racism was overt. Her children hated school. There were fights in the school yard over racial taunts directed at them. There were complaints from the White neighbours about their dog and about having their family and friends to stay. There was no privacy. Everyone in the street knew what was going on in all the households. Ruby writes this about her quarrel with the next door neighbour:

Next day a row broke out over kids fighting. I'd had enough of complaints from Mrs. Jenkins so I ordered her out of her house. 'Come outside and fight as good as you can talk and complain. While you bastards were having your kids in comfort, I was having mine in a tent.' With that I started shaping up to her and she ran inside and slammed the door. I did not see her for days. (Langford 1988:176)

This episode would have been retold many times to Langford Ginibi's friends and

relatives and would have been the source of much hilarity. The “distinctive sense of humour” promoted cohesion of the group because they all shared similar experiences. As Shoemaker suggests, “The reliance upon laughter in the midst of adversity is an important element in the Aboriginal self-image” (Shoemaker 1989:233).

The Humorous Celebration of Life

What has become clear in these examples is the way in which Aboriginal people use humour, not only as a salve to their distress, but also as a way of celebrating life in their ordinary, everyday activities. This kind of humour pervades their literature.

Ruby Langford Ginibi attributes her ability to laugh in spite of hard times to the example of her Auntie Nell. Her poem “Empty Vessel” presents her strategy for dealing with adversity:

My Auntie Nell told me a long time ago,
That empty vessels make the most sounds!
All my life, humour is the only thing that's lifted me,
When I'm nearly out!
My laughter is what I'm famous for, I was told by a friend,
That my laughter is infectious, I do like to have a good belly-laugh.
Now all my family's grown and gone their own way in life,
I'm still thinkin' about what Aunt Nell said,
And I realised why I laugh a lot.
It's mostly because I'm empty inside.
There's no one anymore to make my life full again, like it used to be
Hence
I'm empty for me!
Ha! Ha! Ha! Haw! Har! Har! Aaagghh
(Langford 1991:35)

In this poem, Langford Ginibi uses humour in a characteristically Aboriginal way when she takes a negative concept, the common truism “Empty vessels make most noise” (meaning that those who talk too much have the least notion what they talk about), and reinterprets it, suggesting that humour is what makes her able to continue, “lifts me,” and it is emptiness — redefined as lack of family — that makes the laughter louder. This reinterpretation also adds a poignant

hollowness to the character of the laughter in the idea of being “empty inside.” In this way, humour is revealed as an Aboriginal strategy for dealing with life, but what amplifies the humour is the dark truths that haunt Aboriginal existence.

Elsie Roughsey’s autobiography was published in 1984, and some of her stories recount frontier violence, and tell of Aborigines outwitting their powerful adversaries by trickery, bushcraft or magic. Bain Attwood notes that she conveys a wide range of human emotions towards missionaries under whose control she grew into adulthood. Attwood suggests: “Many of her stories are spiced with humour which functions as a crucial mechanism for getting the better of life by dispelling anger and soothing pain” (Attwood 1989:141). Dormitory life on the mission where Elsie was living for some time as a child was hard, and she witnessed many floggings. Sometimes she was a victim too:

Too much hard work, also many beltings but it was all dormitory custom. There was no sympathy for us by anyone. They, who were in charge of us, were rough and cruel. (Roughsey 1984:16)

Despite the hardships and cruelty, Elsie was able to enjoy a few good times. “I went around making friends and helping missionaries’ wives. I would tell them some funny stories about the other children and we would laugh” (Roughsey 1984:17). She befriended several missionaries, naming them as her best friends. In reference to a White doctor and others who had been good to her, she states that Aborigines kept them in their “memories” and never forgot them: “Our biggest pride we have ... for all she or he had done in the past, is one of the things we never forget ... we highly honour people who do good for us” (Roughsey 1984:17). Clearly she was forgiving, bearing no ill will towards White people in general. Here, once again, humour is identified as a means of creating connections between people, connections that clearly led to a real warmth.

Elsie emphasises the value of tribal life. When she left the mission to join her parents, she wrote, “No one too sad to worry about anything but lived that peaceful life amongst tribal people” (Roughsey 1984:87). She describes a teasing game that they engaged in sometimes which was the source of much merriment for all:

In our midst we had some funny people in men and women. Guthan-

guthan they were called. Well it's a teasing thing ... with fun and laughter. Uncles and nieces play their part. Cousins, brothers and sisters take their part for instance in teasing a woman by poking her or taking her food to give to another until finally she chases them with a stick and the group playfully hit her until another group comes to her rescue. After the play they all sit together and have a great feast with others joining in the eating. Then a big corroboree takes place. (Roughsey 1984:149)

There is a powerful sense of belonging in Elsie's descriptions, as well as freedom from White man's laws, "No one to tell you do this or don't do that but happily roaming in the bush, traveling together from camp to camp, dancing, laughing, hunting, all having fun and jokes ... really and truly the White man can never understand" (Roughsey 1984:17).

The desire for this sense of belonging is also central to Sally Morgan's *My Place*, which is all about her search for her lost Aboriginal heritage. She finds that Daisy, her grandmother, is a stumbling block to discovering the truth. Daisy's brother, Arthur, interprets her behaviour by remarking that she "had been with White fellas too long," meaning she had lost her culture. Arthur and Daisy's White father had refused to recognise them as his children, Arthur explains: "No White man wants Black kids running around the place with his name." In spite of the fact that this rejection, and its impact, had a profound affect on three generations of the family, Morgan writes: "We all laughed then. Arthur was like Mum, it wasn't often that she failed to see the funny side of things" (Morgan 1987:148).

Gendering Humour: Aboriginal Men

Sally Morgan's great uncle Arthur was a jovial old man. She tells how much she looked forward to his visits, for not only was he more forthcoming with information, but was also entertaining company. One example of his wit is worth citing here:

There was a government ration of a blanket which we used to get now and then. It was a blanket we all called a flag blanket; it had the crown of Queen Victoria on it. Can you imagine that? We used to laugh about that. You see we was wrappin' ourselves in royalty. (Morgan 1987: 328)

The grey rectangular blankets issued as welfare to Aborigines by the Australian government along with rations of tea, sugar and flour are part of the colonial history of Australia. In colonial Western Australia, these blankets were emblazoned with the imperial crown in regal colours. This was a declaration of government ownership intended to halt illegal blanket sales by police officers (Carroli et al. 2006). In Queensland, such blankets were marked “QG” and the artist, Fiona Foley, has turned some of these into an artwork entitled “Stud Gins” (Foley 2009:76–79; see Figure 2).

For Arthur and his friends, however, the brand of government ownership that the blankets implied was ignored, and they took great delight in making fun of them, reappropriating them as emblems of their own royalty. In other words only they, as Aborigines, could assume vestiges of royalty in spite of their abject poverty.

A lot of humour is also recorded in Bill Rosser’s *Up Rode the Troopers*, although much of this is concerned with chilling details of the murders carried out by the native police and their White sergeants. Throughout Rosser’s field research and his interaction with his informants are humorous anecdotes. He describes, for example, a goanna hunt which became a real life-comedy. He writes: “We all strolled off to the river to hunt goanna. When I reached the top of the bank, a giant goanna came hurtling over the top and headed straight for me. It was followed by a mob of whooping Blackfellows waving enormous sticks” (Rosser 1990:69). When the goanna ran between Bill’s legs, he jumped high into the air, and his companions were so overcome with mirth that they stopped their pursuit and rolled on the grass clutching their stomachs. In a separate incident, Ruby, one of Bill’s informants, killed two large goannas by the water trough and a group gathered around to inspect them. One of them quipped, “Plenty tucker now. The shop can keep its campie. Everyone laughed” (Rosser 1990:123).

When Bill was accosted by a young man who wanted to show off in front of his peers, he used Aboriginal words to calm him down:

‘Listen Bungi, do you want a smack on the binna?’ (‘My friend who is my junior do you want a smack on the ear?’). He was taken aback by my crisp, friendly retaliation. His vanity weakened and he hung his head. It hurt me

to see his pride ebb from him. I reached out and grabbed him lightly on the arm. 'Hey' I said soothingly, 'Come over to the truck and I will open your tin for you. Don't tell me you're still hungry after that bloody great feed of goanna. You'll get fat like a White fla.' His dignity returned and he laughed loudly. We were all happy again. As he walked away it was quite amusing to watch his skinny little arse moving up and down with each step. (Rosser 1990:129)

When Bill returned to visit his old friend, Cyclone Jack, he was greeted with: "Hey you back again. You bloody mad, you bastard." Bill writes: "They were a humorous lot of buggers and I could not help laughing."

As in the case of Arthur's blankets and Langford Ginibi's son, humour is not limited to everyday events, but is equally applied to the politics of race. Bill and Cyclone Jack discuss a man called Milbong, who had caused serious disruption to the White settlement and was eventually hung. "Milbong saw no harm in stealing because the White man had taken his country and he thought they should give something back. Jack looked at me with a grin and said: 'Sounds like he was the first Black demonstrator'" (Rosser 1990:156). Ros Kidd's research, "Aboriginal History of the P.A. Hospital site," suggests that Milbong (Yilbung) was falsely accused of the death of one accidentally-killed White man and shot dead by sawyers, not hung (Kidd 2000:n.p.).

It is evident from some of the stories that some of the old men liked to hoodwink the younger people. For example, Jimmie Barker told the following story about old Peter to Janet Mathews in 1982. Old Peter lived in the Culgoa region of New South Wales. He sang songs that he claimed the spirits taught him when they visited him at night. Jimmie said that the others did not believe him and asserted that he had "made them up himself." They called old Peter Midjin Midjin, meaning Big Liar. Old Peter would collect his rations at Milroy Station and always wanted more than anyone else. He would threaten to stop rain, bring a flood or produce some dire calamity if his wishes weren't granted. Old Peter believed he knew everything. He could not read but would take a newspaper and hold it upside down while moving his lips slightly. After that he would move among the people and tell them the news of the day. "He was cunning and probably asked a White man for the news which he passed on to us hoping we would be impressed" (Matthews 1982:20).

Bill Rosser's informant, Cyclone Jack, was another elder who played upon the naivety and gullibility of the younger members, whom he suspected knew little about the old ways and so were easy prey for his own amusement. When Bill met up with his old friend again, he asked him to sing a corroboree song.

"Could you sing me a corroboree song now?"

"Yes," he answered without hesitation.

Without further ado he threw back his head and broke into a screechy song.

I tried desperately not to laugh but burst out. Jack looked at me in astonishment,

"Don't you like it?"

I sensed that he, too, was laughing inwardly.

He was a great old fellow. He seemed pleased that he was able to amuse me.

(Rosser 1990:47)

Cyclone Jack died during Bill Rosser's visit. He gives a moving tribute to him: "I recalled once more the corroboree song he had sung for me ... that ridiculous voice he had teased me into thinking was the real thing. The old bugger! That wonderful, harmless, lovable old bugger" (Rosser 1990:166).

Gendering Humour: Aboriginal Women

The use of humour is both a practice central to everyday life, and an active dynamic in the practice of everyday life. Bush cunning can be seen as interaction ritual and homespun philosophy, rather than theory. In her novel *Bitin' Back* (2001), Vivienne Cleven paints a vivid picture of Murri life in the bush. Her story highlights small town prejudice and racist attitudes. The novel is a story about a young Aboriginal man in the small town of Mandamooka in Queensland who has managed not too badly in his earlier life, despite racism and poverty, because of his sporting prowess. His mother Mavis has high hopes that this will be his ticket out of Mandamooka. When Nevil wakes up one morning and tells his mother not to call him Nevil because his name is Jean Rhys "White woman writer," her hopes are shattered and she tries to tell him that football is "everything you know that! Ya got real talent, Nev. Ya could go places. Everyone knows you the best player round here, son ... football is ya only way outa this town" (Cleven 2001:202).

Mavis resorts to “bush cunning and fast footwork” in order to restore “normalcy” as she defines it. Bush cunning uses guile and humour for coping and survival. This is engaged in with a great deal of hilarity, but at the same time the novel raises questions about the relation between Black and White, masculinity and femininity, and gender and race. The novel is filled with tension in view of the possible outing of Nevil/Jean as homosexual, the consequences of which are too frightening to even imagine. In her article on *Bitin’ Back*, Alison Ravenscroft stresses the relationship between humour and danger in this novel, and points to the Aboriginal English word “deadly” for things that are both funny and serious, or powerful (Ravenscroft 2003:189).

Deadly dialogue occurs when Mavis tries to get Nevil out of bed: “Jesus Christ! Get outta friggin’ bed will ya! A woman’s got better things to do than piss about here all day wit you!” (Cleven 2001:2). Nevil resists her attempts to get him moving and insists she address him as Jean. Mavis is stunned and thinks to herself: “Too much smokin pot n pissen up all that grog is what does it. How the friggin hell did he come up with a cockadadoodle name like Jean Reece, for God’s sake! A woman’s name!” (Cleven 2001:2).

Jean Rhys is the author of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that rewrites the story of *Jane Eyre* from the standpoint of Bertha Rochester. In this book, Rhys is the White woman writer who was of great interest to postcolonial theory for her depiction of British nineteenth century racism. Rhys herself had a hybrid identity and an “othered” life – though it is ironic that Mavis finds it even more extraordinary that Nevil thinks he is a *white* woman (Cleven 2001:5). But the rage that Nevil’s cross-dressing could produce in Mandamooka would definitely not be “funny”:

Mavis and her brother Booty both know that the town will erupt in a deadly rage if Nevil appears dressed as a woman: ‘Sis, they’d mob him, ya know that.’ Booty looks tired out, slumpin his shoulders forward. ‘Mave I can’t fight the bloody town for him.’ (Cleven 2001:16)

The novel ends with the Blackouts winning the football final and Nevil being Man of the Match. Nevil turns out to be a potentially successful writer, only acting the part of Jean Rhys as an experiment, but suggesting there are ways out of Mandamooka, other than football. By the time of the match, the situation of Nevil/Jean seems resolved. Nevil is revealed as a promising writer, who has

managed to hide his genius and his typewriter from the judgment of the townsfolk. He will make writing the pathway out of town. He put on a frock and makeup and took the name Jean Rhys as an experiment to see what it felt like to be a woman and also to see what his transgressions would arouse among people who knew him as a Black man. Cleven shows that the dangers that a transsexual faces in an Aboriginal community are of the same order that Aboriginal men and women in Mandamooka, as elsewhere, face in everyday life in living among Whites (Ravenscroft 2003:195). As Alison Ravenscroft argues, Aboriginal men and women are always at risk of being seen by Whites as “border crossers,” intruders. She quotes an AFL spectator who called out to Michael MacLean, “Go back to where you came from. This is not your country nigger boy” (Ravenscroft 2003: 195). Ravenscroft contends that to pass as a woman can be a dangerous practice for a White man and for an Aboriginal man to pose as White and a woman “is a doubly dangerous practice” (2003:189). There is further irony again, in that it is possible Nevil does have a homosexual attachment to his editor.

In Tracey Bunda’s essay “The Sovereign Aboriginal Woman” (2007), her intent is to widen the reading of Indigenous sovereignty by considering how the sovereign warrior woman comes into being in the work of Vivienne Cleven. She argues that the writing of Indigenous people is a sovereign act, and that such works as *My Place* (Sally Morgan 1987), *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (Ruby Langford) and *Aunty Rita* (Jackie Huggins 1994) “reveal the diversity of Aboriginal women’s lives and expose the reader to the harsh realities of racial oppression” (Bunda 2007:75). Furthermore, the realities of life in the mission and reserve system, slave labour for White families, poverty, dispossession and the importance of land, family, kinship and spirituality, “speak from and to our sovereignty as Indigenous women” (Bunda 2007:75).

Bunda reiterates conversations she had with her “kin women” which comprised memories and experiences along with their struggles for the rights of Black women. An elder who had not contributed to the conversation interjected with a few strong words which captured the essence of views expressed: “They think that when they have your fork they think they have your land.” Bunda shows she

is radically original in her joking reference to the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by using the phrase “taking your fork.” She makes reference to fork in *Bitin’ Back*: “Doncha just hate it when them White ones start. Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! We know ya got a big mouth ... and a big fork Dotty Reedman ... No, shame eh Mavis? I’m glad you jobbed her” (Bunda 207:82). Bunda asserts that the Aboriginal woman as sovereign survives the colonising structures mainly through determined struggle, resourcefulness and the use of humour. Aboriginal women write into being the sovereign warrior – the warrior as intellectual strategist, the warrior as nurturer, the warrior as resistance fighter, the warrior as genealogist, and the warrior grounded in spiritual belief (Bunda 2007:76). Bunda suggests that Vivienne Cleven’s character, Mavis Dooley, is representative of the Black sovereign warrior woman, and that Mavis “is in our grandmothers, mothers, daughters, aunts, nieces and tiddas” (sisters). Where there is “safety, comfort, care and love ... the sovereign self of Aboriginal women is Black, bold and centred.” She completes her discussion by saying: “In contemporary situations, she is bitin’ back” (Bunda 2007: 85).

Fiona Nicoll in her review of “*Sovereign Subjects*,” states that Bunda’s emphasis, like Cleven in *Bitin’ Back*, brings an “awareness of the precedence and pleasures of Indigenous social exchange which has always sustained those ... like Mavis Dooley who would ‘talk up’ to White power” (Nicoll 2007: 11).

Like Cleven, Anita Heiss turns the tables in *Sacred Cows* (1996), and writes about White culture as she perceives it, using a great deal of humour in the process. Since Indigenous people have been written about, studied and observed for over two hundred years, Heiss sets out to “have a go at the non-Indigenous population and what they deem sacred.” In other words she is satirising White Australian culture from which Indigenous Australians were excluded.

One of the sacred cows she lampoons is “The Great Ozzie Alement.” In this chapter she claims the excuses for drinking in Australia are endless and ends with this ditty:

Here’s to Baza, he’s true blue
He’s an Aussie through and through
He’s a piss-pot so they say

S'pose to go to heaven but he went the other way
Drink it down, down, down ... (Heiss 1996:11)

In another chapter, "Advance Australia Fare," she writes about lamingtons: "butter cake cut into squares. Using a fork, dip each piece into chocolate icing mixture, then roll in coconut. A little like the assimilation policy, where the idea was to paint Aboriginal people White" (Heiss 1996:77).

She treats other iconically Australian topics, "The Melbourne Cup," "Beach Culture," "Footy Fever," "The Aussie Man's Domain," "A Day on the Hill" (cricket), in similarly jocular fashion. In her own words : "I looked at an opposing culture from an assumed authoritative position, stating perceptions as well as suggestions for bettering it, coupled with humour" (Heiss 1996: IX).

In *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, Ruby Langford also emerges as a tough, humorous, remarkable woman whose sense of humour prevailed throughout all the hardship and grief she had to endure for most of her life. Ruby's daughter was killed on her way to the swimming pool. A car mounted the footpath and crushed her against a brick wall. Ruby resorted to alcohol in her efforts to relieve the pain and heartbreak she was experiencing. Ruby justifies her escape into alcohol thus, "We shared our fun, we were all in the same boat. No money, no land, no jobs, no hope. So we had to find ways to keep our spirits up and that didn't only mean our spiritual ones but also our liquid ones" (Langford 1988:151). Neddy (Nerida) and Ruby liked to socialise at the Empress, a hotel in Redfern. They called it their home away from home. It was a meeting place for Aborigines and there was never a dull moment, "Us Koories always found some way to break the monotony." Ruby goes on to say that the juke box was always blaring and someone would be singing or dancing and, to add some excitement, a "blue" would invariably break out.

Neddy and I were charged up and this gubb (White) bloke flashed his wallet and said, 'Hey girls, do you want to come to the dogs with me?' And we looked at him and said, 'Look mate, we've been going to the dogs for years.' And he looked at us real stupid, as we walked by him chuckling. (Langford 1988:51)

Another time Ruby and Neddy and an Islander girl called Manya went out on the town and enjoyed themselves at various pubs in Sydney. At one port of call they were arrested during a police raid and had to spend the rest of the night in gaol. When they arrived home the next day, Ruby's son, Bill, told them he was worried and had phoned the hospitals thinking they were in an accident. "We told him we were in the cells and he burst out laughing, and said: 'Hah look at the gaol birds!' We did not live that down for months" (Langford 1988:154).

Carole Ferrier in her discussion of the book makes the point that Ruby does not adopt a conventional moral persona, and adds that a distinct feature of Ginbi's recounting of her own life is the refusal "to assume a pose of 'morality;' in this respect she differs from precursors such as Monica Clare and Glenyse Ward, and contemporaries such as Nugi Garimara/Doris Pilkington and Sally Morgan whose narratives have been dominated by self-constructions as moral and respectable." By contrast, "Ginibi talks about her relationships with various men, her difficulties with her children, and her periodic overuse of alcohol" (Ferrier 2006:112).

In the same vein as Vivienne Cleven and Ruby Langford, Gayle Kennedy's novel *Me, Antman and Fleabag* (2007), which won the David Unaipon Award in 2006, is described in its publicity as "packed to the roof with wicked black humour..." and as "a funny and incisive look at contemporary Indigenous life and the family and friends that make it up." In the first pages, Kennedy bemoans the fact that the police move Aborigines on if they are caught drinking in the park, "so they stay at home and party in a yard the size of an old hanky with trains roaring by every time ya favourite song comes on." But Antman's cousin Damian tells them that "white fellas" like drinking and partying too but they have it all worked out so "the coppers don't bother them." Then he advises them to adopt White strategies such as purchasing a new esky, fancy bottles of wine with twist tops which can be refilled later with cheap wine, instead of flagons and casks, a blanket and a picnic basket. Heeding this advice they had no trouble in the park, the White people were friendly, Fleabag had a great time playing with the other dogs and there were no policemen in sight.

I believe we all have a relative like Aunt Pearlie. Kennedy describes her aunt as one of those “flash Blackfullas” who goes to great pains to be accepted by the White people. Aunt Pearlie dresses up in her finery even to purchase a “pint” of milk and “she is always going on about doin things proper, includin speakin.” She always chided them for not pronouncing the “ing” at the end of words such as “nothin, somethin or goin” (Kennedy 2007:39). Although it happened a long time ago the family still laugh about the time she said a kilometre of meat instead a kilogram. Another time she was buying dress materials when she asked for a reel of “White cotting.” Gayle and Antman unable to control their mirth rushed outside and flung themselves down on the nature strip in a fit of uncontrollable laughter. Aunt Pearlie disgusted with their behaviour, snapped: “Just look at you lot. Lying around on the ground like a pack of mongrel dogs. It’s behaviour like that gives the rest of us a bad name” (Kennedy 2007:45).

Kennedy’s chapter, “White Fulla Dreamin” delineates the sentiments of many urban Aborigines including myself. Kennedy herself is from the Wongaiibon Clan of the Ngiyaampaa speaking Nation, and has lived and worked in Sydney since 1973. Her humorous depiction of a dreaming festival that she, Antman and Fleabag attended, pinpoints how most of us cringe when we encounter “bleeding hearts.” When they observe that there are no other Aborigines at the festival and, to make things worse, “no country music,” Antman exclaims: “If this is supposed ta be a dreamin festival, where are all the fuckin Blackfullas?” (Kennedy 2007:67). Adding insult to injury, a White man selling artefacts he had made told them he felt sorry for them because they were not “full blood” and what a shame it was, because he probably knew more about Aboriginal culture since he had lived with the Yolngu of the Northern Territory and was adopted into the tribe: “Because no other ‘Blackfellus’ around everybody was fascinated with me, Antman and Fleabag.” They became so sick of all the attention, especially being told they were not “proper blackfullas” and answering their questions about what it was like being Black, that they escaped to the local pub. While they were enjoying a peaceful drink, a “feral fulla with dreadlocks down to his arse and wearin a Bob Marley t-shirt and carryin a string bag full of shit comes over to our table” (Kennedy 2007:69). Uninvited he “plonks” himself down and says: “Hello Aboriginal people.” They answer, “Hello Anglo man,” and this seems to upset

him. Later Antman explains “He expected us to be able to see that, despite his White skin he had a Black soul.” Ignoring this initial snub, the “feral fulla” says: “So I would be deeply honoured if you would tell me about your culture,” and these remarks were the last straw (Kennedy 2007:70).

An example of the use of irony is in Kennedy’s chapter, “The Hundred Dollar Bill,” where she tells of a situation at her father’s work with the local council. Her father’s workmate, who did not have a licence to drive a truck, swept the gutters and emptied the bins while her father drove the truck. He was called Hollywood. “Hollywood was a White fulla who had an opinion on everything and reckoned he was always right whether he was or not. The Blackfullas gave him his name cos he loved sayin, ‘Don’t try to tell me what to do old son. I am the main actor in this fuckin show’” (Kennedy 2007:71). When Hollywood attained a licence to drive the truck it did not bring joy to her dad because he had to sweep the gutters and empty the bins. Furthermore he could no longer choose the programs on the radio as it was an understanding that the driver of the truck chose the programs. “He had to bring a bit of Blackfulla cunnin to the proceedings.” Her father conspires with his brother and they trick Hollywood into thinking that a hundred dollar bill was found in the gutter. Hollywood, always on the lookout to make money, returned to sweeping the gutters and renounced truck driving, thus making her father happy with his lot again. This chapter highlights how humour works as a “weapon of the weak,” enabling Aborigines to avoid confrontation, while having the last laugh when White superiority is brought down by their trickery.

The Cathartic Value of Humour

The “best Australian novel for years” is Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006), according to Carole Ferrier’s review which underlines Wright’s use of burlesque humour, irony and allegory in this novel (Ferrier 2006b). Burlesque humour is seen in the names and behaviour of Wright’s characters of the mayor and the local cop, Bruiser and Truthful. The irony of the actions of the character Joseph Midnight is beautifully expressed, bringing to mind perhaps actual people one

may have met at some time. Midnight is responsible for the cane toad plague because he brought large numbers of them in so he could get a fifty cents bounty for catching them. Again, he received native title rights money for shooting feral pigs but he instead “let his useless relatives take all the baby piglets home for pets and they bred up to ten piglets each” (2006:53). In the early part of the novel it is clear that Wright’s use of allegory is a brilliant ploy where the arrival of White people is re-enacted by the emergence of Elias from the sea, with Mozzie the fishman, with his “crusade of people in old dust-covered cars” as Wright explains, “totally responsible for keeping the law strong by performing this one ceremony from thousands of creation stories for the guardians of Gondwanaland” (2006:24).

Many Aboriginal people have suffered at the hands of the police and later in the thesis I recount some of the experiences of my father and Albert Holt. Here I refer to Alexis Wright’s depiction of the policeman, Truthful. A brawl broke out at the local rubbish tip at Desperance because Angel Day’s claim that she was the only one to have fossicking rights was challenged by a big woman in a white dress who “looked like the white cliffs of Dover” (2006:25). This led to an all-in brawl with people forming alliances. They started taunting, throwing sticks and stones at each other and screaming “get it straight where you belong” (2006:26). Angel Day’s young son Willy lit a fire which ran out of control attracting the notice of Truthful and the Council members. When Truthful investigated the disturbance, he could not help noticing a lot of injured people everywhere he went. The answers to his questions were non-committal: for example, “What happened to you then?” and the answer would invariably be: “Just an accident sir, no problem. I just fall over.” Having made no headway in sorting out the disturbance, Truthful returned to his office and the Council members to theirs. It was a wasted trip at the expense of taxpayers because nobody living nearby had seen a thing. Maybe the fire “was just an old log smouldering over the weekend and caught alight” (Wright 2006:29). The ironic narrative voice sums it up : “It is true that silence has a cloak because it covered all of those little tin humpies all day after the official people went back to minding their own business” (Wright 2006:2).

In Black literature, it is almost always discernible that humour is used as a lifeline in circumstances of sorrow and depression. It is clear, too, that the cathartic value of humour in these writings is implied with the use of humour for coping and as a mechanism for survival in an unjust world.

In *Yumba Days*, Wharton talks about his life's journey as one of enlightenment, and remarks: "As I have journeyed, I have been aware that it would be all meaningless without a sense of humour to keep everything in perspective along the way" (Wharton 1999:119). These sentiments certainly reflect the outlook of many Aboriginal people I have met during my life's journey, especially members of my own family.

Black literature had and continues to have a cathartic affect on both writers and readers of the literature, inspiring those who so desire to move on into the future. During an interview with Sonya Sandham, Ruby Langford defines her notion of good writing: "It must have the humour, the drama, all the emotions, the laughter, the tears, everything. You can mix the past with the present, bring them back in and out of the story like you're weaving something" (Sandham 1993:13). In "Humour and the defamiliarization of whiteness in the short fiction of Australian indigenous writer Alf Taylor", Anne Brewster postulates that "one of the prime textual vehicles which destabilizes whiteness in these stories is their humour" (Brewster 2008:427). She draws to our attention that Indigenous writers have a high profile in contemporary Australia and their writing "has made a considerable impact on the Australian public". In addition she makes an important point that "Indigenous literature is where most Australians are likely to 'meet' Indigenous people, their beliefs, cultural practices and politics" (Brewster 2008:427). She adds that these stories, alongside the picture of dispossession, portray the "deeply engaging humour and offer a radiant picture of the care, compassion and tenderness of Aboriginal families and their communities and their enduring resilience, inventiveness and power" (Brewster 2008:436).

What Brewster's article highlights is the extent to which Aboriginal literature has become a far more visible part of Australian culture since the 1970s, and central to Aboriginal literature is humour and the way in which it functions in

Indigenous writing as a means of dealing with both everyday life and the Aboriginal experience past and present. One of the most important factors in this rise in the visibility of Aboriginal writing is Black Theatre, which I will address in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: HUMOUR IN BLACK THEATRE

You see, we've always been acting. Aboriginal people are the greatest actors in the world ... we've acted up before magistrates, we've acted up before the police. We've acted up before social workers. We've always done our own mime. (Jack Davis qtd in Shoemaker 1989: 239).

These words of Jack Davis, Indigenous writer and playwright, aptly set the scene for my discussion of Black theatre. Combining “acting” with “acting up,” cultural production with political protest, Black theatre has provided a vital forum for the expression of grief and indignation combined with a powerful Black humour. What is most pertinent about Black theatre today is the focus on Indigenous culture itself and the messages Black theatre transmits to Indigenous people.

Throughout this thesis, attention has been drawn to the fact that all the genres in which Black literature is produced are interconnected by a distinctively Indigenous humour that is also intertwined with everyday life, and all offer potent strategies for opposing the forces of racism and its accompanying injustices. As Black literature has emerged and become accessible through publication, it has become an increasingly visible and important tool for achieving empowerment and strengthening identity. Entering the world of literature has meant that Black voices are heard, and today it is clear that Black voices will not be silenced.

Aborigines have used theatre or drama as a weapon of the weak to achieve empowerment. In this chapter, I examine Black theatre as a weapon of the weak, and demonstrate how humour is central to, and runs through Black theatre in Australia. According to Marcia Langton, a member of the Black theatre cast of the production, *Here Comes the Nigger*, the members consciously recognized that humour was often central in terms of giving strength to people and highlighting aspects of culture that people could appreciate. She says, “Aboriginal humour was a great resource for survival and for appreciating the world. It was also a great way for laughing at and thereby distancing the race hatred (qtd in Casey 2004: 114). Since the late 1960s, there have been hundreds of plays and productions created by Indigenous Australians. In the 1970s, the accepted

images of both Indigenous and European Australians were satirised, “through the use of comedy as a strategy for questioning the cultural underpinnings of racist narratives” (Casey 2004:114). She adds that in shows such as *Basically Black*, entrenched assumptions were challenged when the “White” population discovered themselves being scrutinised and satirised in public.

Because I situate my examination of Aboriginal drama within a political context, I first include a discussion of Bertolt Brecht’s vision and practice of theatre and Augusto Boal’s ideas about the theatre of the oppressed.

Brecht’s Vision and Practice of Theatre

One of the most controversial and influential directors and writers in the twentieth century has been Bertolt Brecht. As a committed Marxist, he viewed and used theatre for its potential as a political medium. Jan Needle and Peter Thomson point to two abiding features of Brecht’s theatrical theory and practice: first, a sense of social responsibility; and, second, and most pertinently for this discussion, a sense of fun (1981: 122).

Black theatre has from its beginnings addressed inequality and injustice in Australian society. In the 1970s and 1980s, the work of Indigenous actors and activists was primarily concerned with what Maryrose Casey and Cathy Craigie have called “contemporary issues of survival” (Casey and Craigie 2011:3). Marcia Langton argues that “the world of Aboriginal sociality and politics is also distant and shadowy” and that Aboriginal comedians and “actors such as Ernie Dingo and Gary Foley perceived this and have transformed the coloniser’s caricatures of us into satirical rhetoric through comedy performances which subvert the comfort of White Australia” (Langton 2003: 119). Foley, like Bob Maza, Bobbie Merritt and other Aboriginal people in the Arts, gained their theatrical training in the Black Theatre in Redfern from the early 1970s (Casey 2004: 97–102). In 2004, Langton told Maryrose Casey that Aboriginality

was a despised and loathed phenomenon at that time in the general community and at least part of our conscious intention was to show that Aboriginal culture could be a lot of fun and that basically you didn’t have to hate yourself for being Aboriginal. (qtd in Casey 2004:115)

Langton suggests that the quality of humour in these theatrical productions was both cynical and anti-racist.

Needle and Thomson note Brecht's unshakeable belief in the *ameliorative* social role of theatrical performance and argue that this belief provided the basic motivation for almost all of Brecht's plays. A Brechtian actor, according to Needle and Thomson, explores, with his audience, a matter of general interest: "They will have two aims: to present a story with social implications in such a way as to encourage the individuals in the audience to pursue those implications and to present it as well and, therefore, enjoyably as possible" (Needle and Thomson 1981:129).

Brechtian theatre generates enjoyment from the stimulation of the intelligence, and moves to the presentation of political content. Alfred White noted that ideological drama is nothing new, citing Brecht, who remarked that: "Medieval mystery plays and Jesuit theatre ... showed didactic tendencies, making them, too, his forerunners" (White 1978: 24). White, writing in the 1970s – the same period in which the Black dramatists were composing their own plays in Redfern – emphasises the Brechtian notion that the audience should think, analyse and criticise the politics of the day. Brecht's well-known dramatic theory – *Verfremdungseffekt*: alienation effect – sought to distance the audience from the events they were watching on stage, reminding them that the performance was just that and creating a clarity which would enable the viewer to look at familiar things in a fresh but accurate way.

In the documentary *Changing Stages: Between Brecht and Beckett* (2000), host Richard Eyre describes Brecht's plays in terms of a clear message that, despite social deprivation, while life is a cruel absurdity, "the human heart will tick on." Most Aboriginal people, including myself, can relate to this message because of our common experience in a White-dominated society.

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed

Augusto Boal, also writing in the 1970s, stated that theatre is necessarily political and can act as an efficient weapon for liberation. Just as Friere (1972) showed illiteracy to be a weapon of the ruling class, so Boal showed theatre to be a weapon, not only of *bourgeois* control; but also of revolution. Boal explains that "In the beginning, theatre was the *dithyrambic* song: free people singing in the open air." It was the carnival or the feast.

Later, the ruling classes took possession of the theatre and built their dividing walls. First they divided the people, separating the actors from spectators; secondly, they separated the protagonists from the mass. Then coercive indoctrination began. (Boal 1979:119)

Boal's techniques, which he used in his political theatre in Peru, were influenced by Brecht's approach. Boal, however, claimed that oppressed people liberate themselves and make the theatre their own. He urged that "The walls must be torn down." He tried to show in practice how theatre can serve the oppressed, enabling them to give expression to their collective voice, contending that "Theatre is a weapon and it is the people who will wield it" (Boal 1979:122). The 1970s were a period in which these ideas circulated, and Aboriginal writers deliberately used art as a political weapon. Thus, Aboriginal dramatists engaged with these ideas as a means to liberate themselves, using theatre as a weapon in the fight for social justice.

Referring to Brecht's vision and practice of the theatre, Boal concurs that "the world is subject to change and that change begins in the theatre itself where the spectator no longer delegates power" to the characters "but frees himself, he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action!" (Boal 1979:155). Boal preached radical drama. He believed that theatre's proper place was as a popular form of communication and expression. He demonstrated Brechtian/Marxist poetics and alluded to the revolutionary potential of transforming the spectator into the actor.

Aboriginal playwrights have used theatre very effectively to project their message to their audience; just as Boal used political theatre in Peru and urged

the people to liberate themselves by using theatre as a weapon to fight oppression, so too have Black playwrights. Justine Saunders, the Aboriginal actor, writes in her introduction to *Plays by Black Australians* (1989) that Aboriginal culture included all the dramatic elements of Western theatre “but since the coming of the white man 200 years ago, that part of our heritage has been under attack, our tribal way has been eroded.” She adds, “merely to be heard, we have had to adopt or adapt European art forms.” Saunders recognises, however, that in the theatre a unique black voice has emerged which is “powerful, experimental, entertaining and politically potent” (Saunders 1989:vii).

The first theatre in Australia was Black theatre, as was evident in corroborees, in story-telling, and in ritual. In *King Bungaree* (1992), K.V. Smith emphasised that mimicry was a talent of the Australian Aborigines who cleverly imitated the sounds made by birds and animals. In corroborees, stories were enacted in song and dance, “copying the stylised ritual actions and movements of crocodiles, kangaroos, emus, crows, dogs and so on. They acted myths from the Dreamtime or everyday scenes of hunting or fighting” (1992:153).

Many early European observers testified to the Aborigines’ skill at mimicry and love of pantomime. But even the most sensitive and sympathetic failed to see this as an art with deep roots in Aboriginal culture. For example, Lieutenant Watkin Tench, one of the most observant of the First Fleet officers, failed to see the essential wit and humour, in the classical sense of the word, in the scenes deliberately staged for his entertainment. In his *Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* (1789), edited and introduced by Tim Flannery as *1788*, Tench wrote:

Then they assemble to sing and dance. We always found their songs disagreeable from their monotony. They are numerous, and vary both in measure and time. They have songs of war, of hunting, of fishing, for the rise and set of the sun, for rain, for thunder and for many other occasions. One of these songs, which may be termed a speaking pantomime, recites the courtship between the sexes and is accompanied with acting highly expressive. I once heard and saw Nanbaree and Abaroo perform it. After a few preparatory motions she gently sunk on the ground, as if in a fainting fit. Nanbaree applying his mouth to her ear, began to whisper in

it, and baring her bosom, breathed on it several times. At length, the period of the swoon having expired, with returning animation she gradually raised herself. She now began to relate what she had seen in her vision, mentioning several of her countrymen by name, whom we knew to be dead; mixed with other strange incoherent matter, equally new and inexplicable, though all tending to one leading point – the sacrifice of her charms to her lover (Tench n.p.).

A friend of mine, upon reading this description of the song and dance act, asked the question: “But is it not possible to see in this pantomime elements of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*?” He suggests that even the most enthusiastic Shakespearian today has to set aside contemporary Western values to appreciate the humour of the pantomime to the full, and I believe he has a point.

Smith drew attention to Bungaree, a well-known Aborigine in the days of the first white settlement in Sydney. He was a familiar figure to the soldiers and convicts of the time. Bungaree’s talent for mimicry was at first confined to aping the manners of Europeans. Later he affected the walk and mannerisms of every governor of the day and conspicuous personalities of the time. It is safe to declare that Bungaree was Australia’s first Aboriginal actor. Smith remarks that “Bungaree’s flamboyant costume, good nature and elaborate manners, set him apart from other Aborigines living on the fringes of the British convict settlement in Sydney. He was witty, intelligent and diplomatic enough to keep one foot in each camp of the black and white. Like Shakespeare’s clown in *Twelfth Night*, Bungaree was wise enough to play the fool and used his natural talents to obtain most of his needs” (Smith 1992: 9). In fact, Bungaree could impersonate the action, the voice, the bearing, of any man with astonishing exactness:

In the past ten years of his life, Bungaree made his living by his wits, chiefly through the role he had invented as a kind of actor in the streets. The role was the sum of his good humour, his foppish manners, his flamboyant dress and, above all, his comic ability as a buffoon and mimic. (Smith 1992:150).

Although they must have been obvious to anyone who cared to notice, these talents of Aborigines to entertain with humour and mimicry were seldom appreciated by White Australians. In any case, there was no forum available for Aborigines to showcase their craft. That opportunity came much later.

The political activism of the 1960s onwards was favourable for the beginnings of a strong Indigenous theatre movement and audiences began to see Indigenous Australians on the stage through Indigenous words and voices. In Sydney in particular, and in other capital cities, activists fighting for social justice were also involved in a range of political agendas, from raising social/political awareness of indigenous issues to community development work. As Casey notes, in the early 1970s “these activities included street theatre, guerilla theatre, publication campaigns and the establishment of drama and dance workshops with a focus on developing skills, training opportunities and commercial performances” (2004:20). A feature of street theatre was its organisation, and performances often were an important part of protests in the 1970s. “We performed as Black Theatre groups, as street groups, in marches. Black Theatre would get involved with all the demonstrations” (Bostock qtd in Casey 2004:45). An example of guerilla theatre is recalled by Gary Foley and recorded by Maryrose Casey:

One scene, enacted on the streets of central Sydney in 1972, recalled by Foley, was designed to support the establishment of the Aboriginal Legal Service. A well known Koori activist was ‘grabbed’ and ‘beaten,’ then ‘arrested’ by two non-Aboriginal actors dressed as policemen. The intent was to raise awareness of the treatment of Kooris on the streets by police but the results were more than the organizers expected ... a non-Aboriginal lawyer involved in the establishment of the Aboriginal Legal Service witnessed the scene from the window of a passing bus. He took action as soon as he could reach a phone. This resulted in the head of the Aboriginal Legal Service, Professor Hal Wootton, Dean of the Law School at the University of New South Wales, ringing up police stations all over Sydney demanding that they produce the Koori person arrested. The police denied any knowledge, and the resulting ‘fiasco’ was both embarrassing and educational. (2004:44–45).

The Black Theatre at Redfern is credited with developing from this type of political street theatre (Casey 2004: 97). In association with the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney, the National Black Theatre Company produced *Basically Black* in 1972. *Basically Black*, a satirical review, highlighted Aboriginal issues. After this followed Kevin Gilbert (*The Cherry Pickers*), Robert Merritt (*The Cakeman*) and Jack Davis (*No Sugar, Kullark* and *The Dreamers*). These plays articulated an authentic Aboriginal voice and, in so doing, established the first wave of indigenous playwrights. In a personal communication, Wesley Enoch states,

“These writers, although they adopted, in part, a European theatrical tradition, also demonstrated a different approach to form and their plays possessed a unique black voice which shouted a potent political cry” (Enoch 2000).

The humour seen in many Black Australian plays comes, not from the European theatrical tradition (although adaptations were made), but directly from the traditions and skills of the Aboriginal people, especially the aspects of mime and impersonation. Adam Shoemaker adds that “while the distinctive Aboriginal approach to humour is visible in their drama ... Its roots are in the tribal/traditional sphere” (Shoemaker 1989: 235). His view is supported by the historical record of Bungaree’s behaviour in the early days of white settlement in Australia. Bungaree undoubtedly resorted to custom and tradition in dealing with his changed circumstances, and “realising the hopelessness of his position and the loss of his heritage, Bungaree determined to play it for laughs. He mocked whites by mocking himself” (Smith 1992:150).

In this way, the first wave of Aboriginal dramatists were inspired primarily by direct observation and recollection of their personal experiences. Their characters were based on individuals they had known; so, to an extent, they were writing for their own people. Shoemaker points out that they did this with a degree of *faithfulness*, knowing that Aboriginal people themselves would be the judges of their works, and this is why “Black Australian dramatists have endeavoured to illustrate the Aboriginal past and present, however sorrowful it may be, with honesty and directness” (Shoemaker 1989:236).

Humour and the First Wave of Black Dramatists

Aboriginal actor and director Richard Whalley told his actors that acting choices were particular and specific:

Theatre can be used in any form, any shape, by any person using any language, with any story or any platform ... you can be a person who’s not playing a role but living that piece of theatre. Not portraying your role as an actor but using it as a vehicle to describe what’s happening to people gone before you, to your people, to your life ... that’s what I think

Aboriginal theatre is all about. I think that's the difference between mainstream theatre and theatre. (Whalley qtd in Manning 1994:173)

The advice Jimmy Chi gave to the actors during rehearsals of *Bran Nue Dae* reflects the same choices in performance. He told actors to work "from your heart, the stuff you have recognised and heard" (Casey 2004:192). Chi wrote the musical which opened in Perth in 1990. More recently, Rachel Perkins directed a film adaptation of the same name which was shown in Australian cinemas in 2010.

That the first wave of black dramatists took their inspiration from direct observation and recollection of personal experience, and their characters were often based on individuals they knew, is evident in many of the plays.

Basically Black (Nimrod Theatre, October to December 1972) was a sketch-based revue-style production. It was a collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, directed by Ken Horler with Bob Maza as assistant director. The all-Indigenous cast included Aileen Corpus, Zac Martin, Gary Foley, Bob Maza and Bindi Williams. The actors wore white masks when acting "White" roles.

I was teaching in Sydney at the time, and went along with a friend to view the show. It was a revelation. Aboriginal issues had not been featured in any stage show I had ever seen. But in this show, Aborigines were the actors. It left a lasting impression, heightened by the euphoria of the gathering after the show, when we mingled with the cast. It seemed that pessimism and degradation were being replaced with optimism and pride.

The revue satirically presented an Indigenous view of Australia "not just to entertain but to communicate with and inform both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences" (Casey 2004:54). The material dealt with included "the Aboriginal Tent Embassy; Lionel Rose; Lionel Brockman; Evonne Cawley; Mervyn Eades, Neville Bonner; Bennelong; and Lord Vestey" (Casey 2004: 54). Gary Foley had written a sketch, described by Maryrose Casey as "bitterly comic," which had a "White" labourer (played by an Indigenous actor in a white mask) and an Aboriginal industrial designer in a bar. "The exchange between the

two characters quickly became aggressive and ended in a fight ... with the Aboriginal designer being beaten and kicked almost to death and arrested for assault" (Casey 2004: 55). Another sketch had Bindi Williams in a red uniform playing Macarthur, with Bob Maza playing Bennelong, locked in a cage at a garden party in London until at one point he steps "out of the cage to show the eighteenth century gentlemen the savage can outdo them all at a minuet" (Brisbane 1972: 18).

Another sketch satirised Jim Sharman's boxing troupes that toured as side-shows from the 1930s to the 1950s. The troupes offered some opportunities for young Indigenous men to earn a living. My uncle, Bill Daley, joined Sharman's boxing troupe. Many years later, he was brain-damaged and homeless on the streets of Melbourne. He died from suffering a stroke when he was fifty.

Other sketches satirised leading Aboriginal figures. One example was the sketch about Super Boong, "which showed a day in the life of Lionel Mouse who fought racism wherever he found it. An incident of racism calls for mild-mannered Lionel Mouse to change into Super Boong. He leaps into action, rushing into a nearby hotel to transform. Unfortunately, Aboriginals are barred from the hotel so that is that, then – nothing can be done, maybe he will help another time" (Casey 2004:56).

Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers* was written in 1968, states the Introduction to the revised edition published in 1988 (Gilbert 1988:vii). It was workshopped by the Mews Theatre Workshop in Sydney in 1971 and, shortly after, performed by the Nindethana Theatre in Fitzroy. In both cases the cast was Aboriginal.

The central characters are itinerant cherry pickers who each year work at a White-owned orchard. "The fruit season represents the climax of the year for these fringe-dwellers," not only because it means money for food "but also because of the convivial atmosphere which is created in their camp" (Shoemaker 1989:236–37). The wages were "only thirty-five bob a day – if we's lucky," whereas Whites who had secure rather than casual jobs got five pounds (Gilbert 1988: 47). The cherry pickers have not lost their Aboriginality. This is clearly understood in the play through the vibrant humour of the dialogue. This jocular

dialogue has definite characteristics. It has sexual overtones with a great deal of punning, often deals with such themes such as religion, alcohol and gambling, and it deflates pretentiousness, especially that of White Australians and White-thinking Aborigines. Shoemaker suggests: "The most important aspect of the play is its assertion of Aboriginality in the face of all odds, and this is accomplished, above all, through the vibrancy of Gilbert's dialogue" (1989:239).

There is a lot of sexual activity, or at least a lot of talk about it, providing humorous dialogue consistently. Johnollo is apparently a favourite in many ways for the women: "That Johnollo! Leven babies he made las season an only one miss!" (Gilbert 1970:12). Sexual innuendo pervades much of the play. Punning, slang expressions, mimicry and quick repartee are the hallmarks of lively scenes, and Shoemaker gives typical examples taken from the first edition:

Fanny: How's yer bunions?

Reggie: A bunion grows on a foot — I haven't made the grade yet!

Fanny: How's yer ditty?

Reggie: Not so pretty – but it's well and able.

Fanny: How's yer knackers?

Reggie: They drive me crackers beneath me sweetie's table. (Gilbert 1970: 28)

Humour is used to mock White-thinking Aborigines. An example occurs when an Aboriginal private army officer visits the camp and introduces himself as Jeremiah Ivan James Chickenmar Edward Vance Goolagong from Myameelareena Station. Another Aboriginal character, Emma, replies mockingly: "You ain't no one just old Jerry Goolly an' you never had no king nor no country cause you is a Blackfellow like us — now git" (Gilbert 1970:11). In this passage from the play, Gilbert uses *double entendre* and the wilful misunderstanding of English that was a time-worn strategy:

Old Toodles: Heh — heh — heh. Say, were you on Mrs Gegg's "clinic" inspection this morning? – no? Well she goes round checkin everyone's teeth and that an she comes to old Bilbar an asks, how's yer pulse this morning, Bilbar? Old Bilbar sez, Oh missus they're hanging very low. (Gilbert 1970:29)

The Cakeman was written in 1973–74 when Robert Merritt was in gaol, performed in Sydney with a cast largely from the Redfern community (Casey

101) and published in 1978. Set on a 'Mission' in New South Wales, this play also portrays the search for the maintenance of identity and the disempowerment of Aboriginal people. The seriousness of the atmosphere is offset through the use of humour. The humour is gentle and consists mainly of sexual innuendo or quips about the bottle.

The play was received with huge enthusiasm and overflowing audiences by a predominantly Koori audience (Casey 2004:104–05), but the humour in the dialogue was generally understood by Black and White Australians alike. Sweet William's expression of misery: "I been stewin all my life. Ain't made me no better, is answered by Ruby: "You always tasted good to me" (Merritt 1974:32).

A central theme in *The Cakeman* is religion: Shoemaker suggests that "the play is patently anti-missionary and, therefore, against forced conversion ... the Church has buttressed the efforts of government to remove all the authority of Aboriginal men" (Shoemaker 1989: 135). The Aboriginal father, Sweet William, declares bitterly:

Rube my missus, she's always thankin Christ for everything, anything, nothing. She an that fuckin book. (With a laugh) She heard me say that, I'd be in strife. Christian she is, my old lady, a mission Chrishyn, the worst kind. (Merritt 1974:12)

Gerald Bostock's play *Here Comes the Nigger* (1977) focuses upon the trope of blindness. It deals with sightlessness and also "colour blindness." His play contains humour which acts to release the pressure of resentment. The humour not only creates light relief; it signifies membership of the Aboriginal sub-culture. Casey comments upon an interview with Bryan Brown, now a well-known Australian actor, who in the early days of his acting career was a non-Aboriginal actor in *Here Comes the Nigger*. She writes: "Brown's memories of the production are of 'lots of laughing from the Aboriginal audience' particularly at moments that he considered 'grim'" (Casey 2004:114). The cast was mixed; Casey comments that, in Gerry Bostock's analysis, "the Euro-Australian actors were disconcerted by what the Aboriginal audience thought was funny. "The indigenous members of the audience were not laughing at the characters but at the situations they recognised from their own experience.' Furthermore, for

Langton, a member of the cast: ‘the community response was wonderful, they got the jokes. We had our own audience’” (2004:114). Bostock also uses frank dialogue, and largely sexual humour in an Aboriginal English that has an immediate impact on the audience. Shoemaker quotes Sam and Verna trading suggestive remarks in this scene:

Verna: Getting any lately, big brother?
Sam: I know love’s suppose t’be blind but I aint found anyone that blind enough yet!
Verna: Nemmine. Ah still loves ya, honey!
Sam: Garn, ya gin. I bet ya say that t’all us handsome Blackfellas!
Verna: Whell ... White may be right, but Black is beautiful! Anyway, I’d rather be a slack Black than an uptight White!
Verna: I know what’s wrong with him. He’s sex-starved, the bastard!
Sam: This could be true!
Verna: Too bloody right, it’s true. But then so am I.
Sam: You gins are all the same, hey?
Verna: I don’t see any of you Black-fellas knockin us back.
(Bostock 1977: 483)

Jack Davis expresses Aboriginality extremely well. In his play *Kullark* (1982), humour is an integral part of the message, and again in *No Sugar* (1986), he deploys amusing dialogue. His clever repartee balances the conflict between police and prisoners, protectors and their charges. Shoemaker sums up Davis’s work in the following statement, “Davis’ success at weaving together observations of his people, his poetry and his wise humour have made him a world-class dramatist of whom all Australians should be proud” (Shoemaker 1989:258).

The Second Wave of Black Dramatists

Wesley Enoch, Indigenous director and writer, and producer of the stage productions *The Sunshine Club* and *Fountains Beyond*, recounted how in 2000 the second wave of Indigenous theatre had been developing for almost a decade. Referring back to the first wave, he notes that whereas Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert and Robert Merritt borrowed from Western dramatic traditions to tell their stories of race relations and to make political statements, the second wave of Indigenous theatre turned its attention to Black culture itself. This second wave of Indigenous theatre features artists who are “confidently Black” and who have

inspired a new performance form. Leah Purcell and Ningali Lawson, for example, have used monodrama effectively with a masterful integration of story-telling, stand-up comedy, autobiography, satire and characterisation, often through a trilingual mix of Aboriginal English, English and traditional languages. Their messages are still political, as in the first wave, but these contemporary artists play with a variety of forms, from the abstract to the musical, “This generation acknowledges the past in the present, celebrating and asserting cultural identity and Aboriginality” (Enoch 2000).

Three Indigenous stage presentations, *Black-ed Up*, *Skin Deep* and *The Sunshine Club*, viewed in 1999 and 2000, will be discussed in more detail in the next section. *Black-ed Up* is about Aboriginal theatre through the period generally referred to as the first wave of Indigenous playwrights. Initially aimed at the senior classes in high school, the play explored the dramatic representation of Indigenous Australians in theatre and film with selections from the works of Gilbert and Davis. The production aimed to drive home a serious message through laughter. In an interview with me, the director Wesley Enoch stated, “We use a lot of comedy in the pieces and rather than taking the sledge hammer approach we want to make audiences, mostly school students, laugh and then think about the issues” (Enoch 2000).

The Indigenous Performing Arts, Kooemba Jdarra production, *Skin Deep*, by Dallas Winmar, explores the everyday situations where Aboriginal women experience skin-related racism. *Skin Deep* is an exposé of the absurd but pervasive notion that blackness or whiteness of one’s skin reflects one’s moral or human worth. Winmar plays with audience expectations, sometimes through direct role reversal where a black actor plays a white character and *vice versa*, or, more subtly as when a White character plays a pale-skinned Aborigine. Humour is used effectively to offset the starkness of the truth or reality. In the words of the Director, Nadine McDonald, in an interview with me: “Historically, the shame and guilt of being different, other than White, has been constantly perpetuated through government policies, media propaganda, social stereotypes and cultural ignorance” (McDonald, Interview 3 Sept. 2000). However, at the heart of the play is the possibility of true friendship between Black and White.

The Sunshine Club by Wesley Enoch is a musical about the plight of Aboriginal soldiers returning from the Second World War to Brisbane only to find that the harmonious war-time fellowship they had with White Australians was not continued in civilian life. "A sad tale but true" wrote Alison Cotes in the *Courier-Mail* ("What's On" 29 Nov. 1999). But out of that actual situation grew a number of social clubs where Black and White Australians could mingle comfortably together and sometimes find happiness in cross-cultural romantic relationships: the Sunshine Club was one such place. The musical is light-hearted and enjoyable. There is reference to Aboriginal spirituality and the use of a few Aboriginal words, such as Murri and Migaloo; there is reference, also, to the double standards of the church, for example, when the church minister says that marriage between races should be encouraged. When it comes to the test, his own reaction implied, "Yes, but not to *my* daughter." The humour is subtle throughout this musical, with particularly clever repartee in reference to politicians.

I attended the stageplay, *Solid*, in Brisbane and did a personal interview with Ningali Lawson after the show (Lawson, Interview 10 Oct 2000). This drama is an example of how the second wave of Indigenous theatre focuses attention on Black culture itself, and, by so doing, explores its complexity. There are real differences in opinion, aim in life, and world view between the two characters, Carol (Ningali Lawson) and Graham (Kelton Pell). These differences arise from the lives they have lived. Carol comes from a traditional lifestyle and Graham grew up in an urban environment. So we have the traditional versus the urban scenario with Carol appearing to be the stronger personality. She has a sense of purpose in her life while Graham is heading for permanent *no-hoper* status. *Solid* offers hope in its often humorous and always empathetic depiction of black problems.

An example is the opening scene of the drama where Carol is working in an office in Perth:

There is a knock at the door. Carol rolls her eyes. There is another knock.
Carol: 'Come in.'
Ted enters in a hurry
Ted: 'Is the boss in?'

Carol: 'Nah Ted, he's with the minister.'

Ted: 'Shit I wanted to see him before he went. Is he going to push for that extra money we need?'

Carol: 'You reckon he tells me anything?'

Ted: 'Of course he does, you do all his work. You're the only one who does work here. Where is everybody else?'

Carol: 'Terri's got family problems, Shorty's gone home to a funeral.'

Ted: 'No wonder us Blackfellows never get anywhere, no one ever fucking works.'

The play moves to Graham who is hitch-hiking, as Carol, on her way back to her country to attend her *Jubbi's* (grandfather's) funeral, meets up with him. Carol accepts Graham's offer to fix her car in exchange for a lift. She remarks, "You got everything aye?" Graham answers, "Yeah, screwdrivers, pliers ... " Carol interrupts, "No, I meant all this other stuff. You got a lot of stuff for a Blackfella."

There is a clear message intended here that blackfellas usually travel light and have few possessions. At night, Carol points out the various stars in the sky, and Graham says, "My Nan told me an old Nyoongah story about a big 'waitch' in the sky, but I could never see it ... air too filthy I guess. Never knew the wetjella stole our dreaming with pollution as well as the bible."

When Carol and Graham drew close to Fitzroy Crossing, Graham asked what it was like, and she replied:

It's the deadliest town. A lot of people just come into Fitzroy and see all the drunken blackfellas and all the cans lying around and they just keep on going. But the few who stop there find out how friendly everyone is... you go down to the pub on a Friday night, it's a blackout boy! We're the majority in town!

Graham's answer to that is, "Solid!" Carol informs him that her mob have many organisations and enterprises and own the supermarket, a roadhouse and half the pub:

'Ha the pub aye. I'll tell you a story. They reckon this satellite went over Fitzroy one time taking all these photos. They looked at them and thought Fitzroy was full of diamonds ... but they looked at those photos really close up, you know what it was? It was all those cans at the pub! They both laugh.

At Fitzroy Crossing, when Graham leaves his gear unattended to join a drinking

party, it is stolen. Finding himself destitute he complains to Carol who offers to take him out to her community where he can recover; but Graham says he can't go because he has lost his brand new pair of basketball boots. Carol replies, "They're gone. Five people could have worn em last night and they're half-way to Balgo by now."

The message seems to be about honesty – let's face up to what's what and do something about it. The play is directed especially at other Indigenous Australians (Lawson, Pers. comm., 10 Oct. 2000).

Graham agrees to go to Carol's community where her mob makes him work hard and feeds him on traditional food, "Tucker I never eat before ... emu, snake and goanna."

Then he tells Carol:

And they been teaching me to ride horses ... they chucked me on a horse. Great big fella, and they never tightened the saddle either. I'm riding, saddle going one way, me going the other way. Ducking branches, trees trying to knock me off the saddle, not knowing how to stop. Everyone pissing themselves laughing.

Solid pulls no punches in issues besieging both urban and traditional communities. It also identifies the strengths and strategies of survival. The blunt honesty of the story carries the characters through adversity. The message for Indigenous people is, 'Getting real is getting out of trouble', and for White audiences, "Black culture is alive and well and made up of people from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences" (Lawson, Pers. comm., 10 Oct. 2000).

Box the Pony is a one-woman show by Leah Purcell. It is, as Frances Whiting from the *Courier-Mail* describes it, "a bitter sweet bouquet to her childhood" and early adult life. In an interview with Whiting, Purcell describes this as "Ugly times, yes, but times that made me who I am today" (*Courier-Mail*, 29-10-2000). Sian Powell describes how Purcell left Murgon, in rural Queensland, ten years ago. "When she hopped into her Datsun Sunny and took off for the big city, she didn't have much in the way of baggage barring a prodigious singing and acting talent, and a superb sense of comic timing" (Powell, "King Leah" 15 May 1999).

Whiting writes that humour has always been Purcell's friend. "Her innate ability to see the funny side of the most hopeless situations and an inbuilt mechanism for showing off have saved her skin again and again" (*Courier-Mail*, 29-10-2000).

In *Box the Pony*, some of the play's most evocative, moving and confronting scenes involve Purcell's relationship with her alcoholic mother. Haunting images of a little girl pleading in a sing-song voice, "Please Mum, can't we go? I'm tired," stay with the audience long after the curtain goes down. Purcell relates to Frances Whiting how her mother, a big, vivacious, fun-loving and hard-working woman, struggled with alcoholism and it was up to her to pick up the pieces. "My job was to look after my mother ... I never judged her or her drinking ... I saw her sadness and I saw how she escaped from her sadness" (Whiting, *Courier-Mail* 29-10-2000).

Since then it has been a roller-coaster ride for Purcell whose talents and truthfulness in telling her story have brought success. Television roles in *Police Rescue* and *Fallen Angels*, and sell-out seasons of *Box the Pony* throughout Australia, and in London, bear witness to this claim, as Purcell says, "It's enough to make a little Murgon girl's head spin." She finishes her interview with Frances Whiting with this profound statement, "Everyone likes a laugh. Blackfella, Whitefella — laughter doesn't have a colour, does it?"

The Mary G show is a six-part variety series which began on SBS television in September 2001. The half-hour show which also features local Indigenous music and the comic talents of Stephen Baamba Albert, Uncle Tadpole in *Bran Nue Dae*, showcase the culture and communities of the Kimberley Aboriginal people. Mary G invites viewers to two remote communities in each program. She uses humour to deal with her subjects.

Mark Bin Bakar wanted to find a new way to give Indigenous people a voice, so he took the name of Mary Geddardyu, Kriol for "You've got to be joking. Get out of here" (*Mary G Show* 15 Jul. 2001). He put on a dress and was snapped up by SBS. Mary G is the steely, vivacious and proud queen of the Kimberley. She has achieved star status in her own community and in Aboriginal Australia. In a personal interview, Mark Bin Bakar commented that "Mary G is an Aboriginal

auntie, full of cheeky advice on sex and love, along with straight talk on how to get off the grog and ganga, how to keep the spirit, community and culture strong.” He claims that every Aboriginal family has a Mary, the *heavy one*, the *empowered one* who’ll serve you a verbal back-hander to scare you to think. “Mary can say, ‘You don’t want to drink all that grog. It’ll bugger your gear box up, your muffler will fall down and you’ll have no engine left” (Attenborough 2001).

Bin Bakar’s mother, Phyllis, was placed in a Catholic orphanage in Broome by the authorities after being taken by her mother to a doctor in Derby. Her fate was similar to other Aboriginal girls of mixed descent. She grew up under the care of the St John of God sisters. Bin Bakar adds:

Mary G is the voice of the stolen generation women – her sense of humour, her outlook on life, the way she sees the world comes from these women. They laugh at themselves, they have a lot of wisdom. My mother has the uncanny gift of laughing – she’s famous for it.

But all the orphanage girls laugh at themselves and their own miseries, it’s how they mask their grief ... it’s not negative, and not positive, more like – “Let’s just accept it and laugh at it” and that’s what I grew up with. (Attenborough 2001)

Before his success with Mary G, Bin Bakar had taken on the job of artistic director at Goolarri Media in Broome, made a film telling his mother’s story and begun planning the event that became the hugely successful 1992 Stompem Ground Festival. This biennial event brings together traditional and contemporary indigenous culture and attracts Australia’s leading indigenous performers. Bin Bakar tells this story to Wendy Attenborough of the *Weekend Australian*:

Stompem was my way to heal. It was giving our people something they didn’t have -they’ve all the culture, the language, but they didn’t have the platform... there was nothing like it before – it was about empowering our community and letting them have pride. I remember one old woman came running out of the catering room where she was cooking and she started dancing. I’ve known that woman all my life and I’d never seen her do any traditional dancing before. (Attenborough 2001)

Bin Bakar says that Mary G does not run away from politics, “We need those leaders, and Aboriginal people will always be associated with politics until there is full recognition for Aboriginal Australia”. But he declares, “She brings it back down to the community level so people can laugh about it and have a laugh at themselves” (Attenborough 2001). Wendy Attenborough finishes her interview with, “For mainstream Australia, too, Mary shows that Aboriginal people have a sense of forgiveness and a sense of humour.”

Jimmy Chi’s musical *Bran Nue Dae* is about an Aboriginal boy’s flight home from the city of Perth to his homeland *Djaridjen (Lombadina)*. His journey in search of identity, love and security takes us across the state of Western Australia, in a blend of opera, comedy, song and dance and romance (Casey 2004:180). For the opening scene of the musical, the setting is *Sun Pictures* in Broome, a place where they still show pictures after 80 years; and a picture theatre where segregation of audiences was the norm, the Aboriginal population being relegated to the front rows of the theatre. The musical opens with the singing of the national anthem of the time and with an image flashing on the screen of Queen Elizabeth the Second, seated on a horse, and smiling benignly at the audience. “God Save Our Gracious Queen” is rendered in a harsh cacophony of out-of-tune voices. The lampooning of the national anthem is a statement against the imposition of white culture and the injustices of British rule or, in other words, a protest against the white invasion of Aboriginal culture.

Bran Nue Dae is a story of how a young man called “Willie” finds an uncle called “Tadpole” and a whole lot more besides. It is a story of the trauma of assimilation. It is Jimmy Chi’s story and that of many other Aborigines. The idea for the musical grew out of Jimmy’s experiences of dislocation and imposed aspirations and took shape in songs which weave the rich fabric of humour in this very potent medium. Humour is used to ease the pain of Aboriginal contact history. It is used in the healing process. It is therapeutic. Humour is employed to encourage Aboriginal people to come to terms with the past and to ease them into gaining hope in the future – a “Bran Nue Dae.” Humour helps them to value their culture, as opposed to the one they were told was superior. Humour is used to poke fun at the oppressive European institutions, for example, the church,

police, schools, and the government Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Humour is also used to educate other people about Aboriginal history since white contact. It is not confrontational. It draws people into a situation and teaches them through laughter. The only way Aboriginal people can deal with the horror they have been through is to laugh about it. The only way to get the perpetrators to acknowledge the harm their treatment has done to them is through humour.

The musical introduces specific humour into things relating to sex. In Aboriginal society there is much laughter and joking about sex. The musical uses humour to convey the contrast between the sexual attitudes of Black and White. It also points to the defects of European ways of talking about sex, wherein guilt often inhibits free and easy discussion, and where it is impolite to laugh and joke about sex. As a Christian boy, Willie had to confess about masturbating and had to do penance for his sins. Humour lampoons attitudes, strange to Aborigines, which condemn the natural expression of sex while offering little sex education. At the same time, a leader of the saving community, the church, impregnates Teresa, an Aboriginal woman. When Willie tells Tadpole that he “knew nothing about that kind of thing,” Tadpole explains that sex should be free and openly enjoyed, and tells him to go and watch Slippery and Marijuana Annie.

Jimmy’s Catholic schooling impressed upon him that he had to be reliable, clean, on time and totally assimilated. In Jimmy’s own words, he and the other Aboriginal boys had to be “*super niggers*.” They not only had to achieve as well as, but better than their white counterparts. Part of this brainwashing was also designed to imbue them with the mission in life to save their own people. Jimmy failed to get his degree and suffered great torment because he could not save his own people. The scene, in the production, where Willie and Tadpole are thrown into gaol is really an enactment of Jimmy’s anguish, and humour is used to diffuse the pain. Tadpole demands his rights to legal aid; but the legal officer, who also happens to be his cousin, is in gaol too! This symbolises, poignantly, the bitter truth that those who are supposed to save their people are themselves bound by the chains of white institutions.

Christian religion is small comfort to Aboriginal people when it is seen not to practise what it preaches. Teresa, who had a child to the German missionary, is more than comical in her nun's garb and actions. In the end, her journey through life leads her to discover her own Aboriginality. The clear message is that everyone is related and we all need to take a journey to search for our common humanity.

Black theatre has been very effective in empowering the victims of European oppression. Tom E. Lewis, who played the role of Jimmie Blacksmith in the film *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, said in an interview with Debra Aldred in the *Courier-Mail*:

You are sharing in a story which doesn't start with "Once upon a time" and the beautiful thing about theatre is you can use elements of cultures and the dynamics of cultures to show how precious the cultural world that we live in is. Governments have to look after the world of arts. It is our new corroboree place and we are inviting people to see. You only have to come and warm yourself. (Aldred 12 July 2001)

Another example of personal empowerment through theatre (both spiritually and financially), is the Indigenous actor Aaron Pederson who has used his talent for acting to achieve positive and successful outcomes. It has been a long journey for him from a street kid in Alice Springs to stardom. He became a strong voice in improving the perception of Indigenous acting and has always ensured his acting choices were based on empowering his people and opening the minds of non-Indigenous viewers. He says the roles he undertakes "need to challenge stereotypes, educate viewers and strengthen his spirit" (Carne, 1 Aug 2004). These sentiments also came through strongly during my interviews with members of the Indigenous Performing Arts group, Koemba Djarra.

In the comedy *Eating Ice Cream*, which I viewed in Brisbane (20 Aug. 2004), Pederson plays Maca, an Aboriginal man who has battled a world of pain, but who, underneath the stereotyped assumptions, reveals himself to be a deep soul full of wisdom. Pederson told Lucy Carne that his character in this play represents every Aboriginal man. I would qualify that by saying his character

reminds me of the men in my own family who were around in the days of my childhood.

Summary

Aborigines have used theatre and drama as a weapon of the weak to achieve empowerment. Oppressed by the dominant white culture in adopting some of the dimensions of the culture of the oppressors, began the journey toward empowerment and liberation. They had to take the initiative by developing their own strategies, incorporating some of those of the white culture, particularly education. Of course this is not a new initiative, Paolo Freire espoused the usefulness of using certain aspects of the dominant culture to serve as instruments in the struggle for liberation.

By the same token Bertolt Brecht's vision and practice of theatre and Augusto Boal's ideas about theatre of the oppressed were encapsulated in the black theatre movement. Indigenous playwrights used theatre very effectively to project their message to the wider community. The black voice was described by Aboriginal actor Justine Saunders as "powerful, experimental, entertaining and politically potent" (Saunders 1989:vii).

However it must not be overlooked that black theatre was the first theatre in Australia as evident in corroborees, storytelling and ritual where the talent of mimicry was emphasised. Smith (1992:153) drew our attention to Bungaree, a well-known Aborigine in the early days of white settlement in Sydney, saying Bungaree was witty, intelligent and "wise enough to play the fool and used his natural talents to obtain most of his needs."

Political activism, reaching its peak in the late 1960s and 1970s as a worldwide phenomenon, promoted the beginning of a strong indigenous theatre movement in Australia. Playwrights Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert and Robert Merritt, whose works are said to depict an authentic Aboriginal voice, established themselves as credible artists. Their plays are generally known as the first wave of black drama.

They illustrated the past with honesty and directness with the use of humour to temper the starkness of the past.

The second wave of black dramatists still had a political message but the emphasis turned to black culture itself. These black artists are described as “confidently black” in a new performance form. For instance Leah Purcell, Ningali Lawson and Mark Bin Bakar (Mary G) use a masterful integration of story-telling, stand-up comedy, autobiography, satire and characterisation, often through a mix of English, Aboriginal English and traditional languages. In the words of Wesley Enoch, indigenous writer, director and producer of stage productions, “This generation acknowledges the past in the present, celebrating and asserting cultural identity and Aboriginality” (Enoch 2 Oct 2000).

The dramas *Box the Pony* by Leah Purcell, *Solid*, in which Ningali Lawson plays a dynamic role, and the musical *Bran Nue Dae* are reviewed in this chapter as representing the confidently black of the second wave of Black dramatists. The Mary G show on SBS TV also received critical comment together with an interview with Mark Bin Bakar, the Mary G character in the show.

Black theatre acts as a catharsis for many black actors. In an interview with black actors from Kooemba Jdarra, the Black Performing Arts Company in Brisbane, I was told by some that they felt a strong sense of power when confronting a white audience, while others said in acting various scenes, they were able to gain comfort in coming to terms with the past.

In this chapter it is clear that Aboriginal humour has become a valuable commodity to be traded for economic security and independence for both actors and the Black theatre movement. This is yet another phase of Aboriginal humour as it changes to meet new challenges. So a lot of water has gone under the proverbial bridge since humour was first used to regulate and for social control and, later, for opposing the dominance of the Anglo-Celtic culture. The next chapter will focus on how Aboriginal people have successfully applied humour in their Visual Art.

CHAPTER 6: HUMOUR IN INDIGENOUS VISUAL ART AND FILM

There is a growing number of visual artists exploring their identity, their sense of time and place, their reaction to contemporary standards and morals which have been thrust upon them. They are doing this with concern for their race, with love for their own art, with expertise and above all with a fabulous sense of humour. Let us all join them and celebrate *Black Humour*. (O'Neill and Barney, *Black Humour* 1997)

At the launch of the *Black Humour* art exhibition in 1997, Tess McLennan, Assistant Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in her introduction to *Black Humour* (1997), comments: "Noble savage, victim, angry political activist ... yes these are accepted general stereotypes of Australia's Indigenous population but a race of humorists ... never. Impossible" (*Black Humour* 1997 Canberra Contemporary Art Space).

Many Australians subscribe to these stereotypical labels, thus overlooking Black artists' capacity for creating humour and, more significantly, they fail to appreciate the increasing trend for Black artists to communicate and express themselves with humorous messages in their art.

Furthermore, Marcia Langton contends that in the past three decades the Indigenous Art Movement has led to a genuine recovery of Aboriginal cultural heritage, and brought "Indigenous Australians' identity into the centre of Australian life by introducing the world to tribal mythologies and becoming a multi million dollar industry into the bargain" (Langton 1993:78).

I discuss below a number of Black artists who, along with many others, have shown that Aboriginal humour is powerfully present in the visual art world, where a growing number of Black artists is producing work which uses humour to foster identity, self esteem and self determination. They have used their craft as a conduit for breaking stereotypes and for instigating change in Aboriginal art that is understood both nationally and internationally.

Aboriginal tradition placed a high value on visual art to communicate and, indeed, record stories and ownership of country. Traditionally, the use of humour was a powerful agent of social control within the communities.

In support of the claim that visual art was important for communication in traditional times, I refer to Langton who states that observers have commented often on the extraordinary amount of time and resources that Aboriginal people devoted to the arts and religious ceremonies: "Visual and oral expressions have been very elaborate ... oral, dance and musical tradition and the visual arts were more elaborate than the material culture ... for hunting and gathering and preparing food, shelter and apparel" (Langton 1993:9). Langton maintains that the large output of visual art, film, video, music and the performing arts currently produced by Aboriginal people is a modern development of the great value they have traditionally placed on the visual and oral arts. She says: "The audiences for these art forms are Aboriginal communities, the wider Australian public, and there is an increasing international interest and demand" (Langton 1993:9). Here she is moving beyond the "salvage paradigm" which sees art as a survival of pre-colonial times and she represents it as part of a modern engagement with Aboriginal Australia and with national and international audiences.

This chapter will focus on visual art, a medium successfully exploited by Black artists to showcase their perceptions of the world they live in, their identity and their place in the scheme of things. They are not just representing themselves, they are making an intervention in the world to change it. This is often achieved through humorous messages or statements in their artistic production.

I will begin by going back to the work of artist Tommy McCrae, who, from the 1860s, made detailed sketches of hunting and corroboree scenes in ink. Then I will show how Lin Onus demonstrated in his art productions that the gap between traditional and urban, White and Black, can be bridged by blending European and Aboriginal art forms in a humorous way. The art productions of other artists such as Sue Elliott, Fiona Foley, Julie Gough, Bianca Beeton, Laurie Nilsen, Gordon Hookey, Richard Bell and Destiny Deacon, confound the traditional expectations of "real" Aboriginal art in ways that will be discussed later in the chapter. I will argue that it is a White myth that Aboriginal people only represent themselves as authentic, rather than using art as a weapon or tool in inter-cultural exchange. I also discuss several films produced and directed by

Indigenous people or that involve their collaboration with non-Indigenous film makers.

In visual art, as in literature and theatre, Aborigines rely on their shared experiences to communicate and connect with each other, and they transmit messages to each other very effectively. Neville O'Neill, Curator of *Black Humour*, opines that humour in art is universal and diverse at the same time. It was pointed out early in this thesis that although humour is universal, it is also culturally specific. When O'Neill describes it in art as diverse, it is assumed he intends to include cultural specificity, in which case we can safely say that humour in Black visual art, apart from being meaningful to Indigenous viewers, is also appreciated by many from the mainstream population. Beyond the universal/specific distinction, it is important to be mindful that the art is doing different things for different audiences. So the humour might tend to do one thing for Aboriginal audiences and another for non-Aboriginal audiences.

O'Neill comments on visual art: "Humour is not a case of ha ha ha, wasn't that funny! Humour can conceal an ugly sharp blade that causes pain and hurt if used with malicious intent or ... thoughtlessly" (O'Neill and Barney 1997). Racism in visual art must be addressed here, although briefly. However, Aborigines have historically often been the butt of racist cartoons, comic strips and advertising; but suffice it to restrict this section to a minimum of examples. Phillip Adams writes that when he was growing up his generation knew nothing, and cared less, about Aboriginal culture. "For all practical purposes, for most of us, Aborigines were either the butt of Joliffe, or Jacky jokes," and Aboriginal art "was the Joliffe cartoons in *Pix* magazine, showing lubricious lubras in mini lap-laps. Or the drawing of a Black man naked except for his dazzling white Pelaco shirt – with the slogan, "Mine tinkit they fit." Aboriginal culture was "confused with mulga wood ashtrays, crude motifs on tea towels and plastic boomerangs in tawdry souvenir shops" (Adams 2004:1). At the age of sixteen, Eric Joliffe went bush, working as a boundary rider, rabbit trapper, shearing hand, and doing other work connected to the land. During his war service he spent time in Arnhem Land and Western Australia where he met Outback story teller, Bill Harney, and through him learned something about Aborigines. Later he became

a cartoonist for the *Bulletin* magazine and *Smith's Weekly* in Sydney, and comic-strip writer and drawer for *Pix* magazine. The Anti-Discrimination Board and others brought allegations, in 1980, that Joliffe's portrayal of Aborigines was racially biased and discriminatory. Joliffe defended himself vigorously and was supported by none other than the eminent Australian anthropologist, Professor Elkin. However Elkin did severely criticise the Australian entertainer, Rolf Harris who, in "Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport" warbled, "let the Abos go loose, Bruce, they're no further use." A contradiction if ever there was one! Suffice it to say there is a plethora of cartoons, advertisements and comic strips depicting Aborigines as "bare footed, flat faced morons, clad in discarded White men's clothes" (Adams 2004:1). While this thesis is not about racist representations, the latter are part of the argument because racism is a negative social force and humour has been widely used to cope with its repercussions.

Following O'Neill's assertion that Aborigines were the butt of racism in art, he adds: "People often wrap or conceal truth in humour – they need to release the tension by making light of the problem." I will investigate how Black artists have managed to do this, but will first refer again to my discussion above about how Aborigines overcame the culture of silence when they became empowered by breaking through to publication. They could then speak out about their situation by writing books and plays, and performing their drama. Paulo Freire's advice to the oppressed peoples of the world was this: "The dominated must incorporate some of the dimensions of the dominant culture to serve as the very instruments of their own struggle" (Freire 1976:86). Indigenous visual artists have also often (consciously or unconsciously) applied this rationale to their work, and used humour to counteract the racism and stereotyping that permeates the comic strips, cartoons and advertising of the past.

A study of a selected group of Black artists whose use of humour has made inroads into the world of mainstream art follows. The first of these to be discussed is Lin Onus (1948–1996). "For most of his artistic life, Lin Onus demonstrated his commitment to bridge the gap between urban and traditional, Indigenous and White Australia, in his multi-layered and humorous works by use of diverse but uniquely Australian images." The travelling exhibition, *The Art of*

Lin Onus 1948–1996, includes work produced in the final three decades of his life, which comprises paintings, prints and sculptures, animated films as well as an accompanying documentary. Onus came from a small-business background making artifacts for the tourist trade. He shares this background of “kitsch” art with Richard Bell who also crosses over to high art as a prestigious and symbolically valuable sphere of culture. Bell’s art receives attention later in this chapter.

Onus’s work often demonstrates a rich humour.

Perhaps he learned the power of humour from his father, Bill, who in his role as president of the Australian Aborigines League was asked to provide a suitable token Aboriginal name for a new Melbourne community festival. Lin relished how his father suggested ‘Moomba’ to the gullible city fathers, saying it meant ‘Let’s get together and have fun.’ Moomba remained the name of the festival for 50 years despite its real Aboriginal meaning being ‘bum’... (*Art Nomad* 28.5.2014)

Weekend at Garmedi is an example of how his visits to Arnhem Land from 1986 influenced him. Jack Wunuwun, an Aboriginal artist and elder, became his mentor. *Weekend at Garmedi* was based upon one experience on a visit. The artist was charged by a bull while bending over to tie his shoelaces. Alerted by cries of women, in the painting he captures the humour of this moment by depicting the landscape from an upside-down perspective.

The title of the retrospective exhibition, *Urban Dingo*, at the MCA in Sydney in August 2000, arose from his identification with the dingo. The dingo is used as a metaphor for the underdog, for survival and adaptation, and could encompass Aborigines generally. Metaphor and motif are prevalent features of his work; and the use of the toilet duck in several works, for example, or, particularly, Onus’s work *Fruit Bats* (1991) which was positioned at the entrance to the MCA exhibition, show his use of ironic juxtaposition. Michael Cathcart comments on the latter work:

The basis of the work is a commercial Hills Hoist clothesline, an object of high-on sacred significance in the suburban dreaming of white Australia ... the hoist does service as a tree to a colony of magnificently coloured, fibreglass bats. There are 100 of them, suspended upside down over the scatter-pattern of their hand-painted droppings. It’s as though the racist

sins of Australia's present and past came home to roost in the neat backyards of the nation. (Cathcart 2000)

Onus's "versatility and adaptation allowed him to reach across generations" of different audiences. His hero "Kaptin Koori" and "The Continuing Adventures of X and Ray" caught the attention of younger audiences. He paints in a symbolic and comic style that can capture the imagination of children, demonstrating his flair and versatility.

In her introduction to the *Black Humour* exhibition, the Director, Jane Barney, informs us that there are those who still regard dot paintings as the only real Aboriginal art saying, "the collectors still want dots!" So artist Sue Elliott gives them dots. In her painting, in acrylic on cardboard and entitled *A Bullet A Day Keeps The . Away* (Figure 3), she could be read as saying there is a stark contrast between the cultured desire for traditional art and the unpalatable truth behind that art. She reminds us that the attitudes behind the bullet have not changed that much and that the "demons evoked by Pauline Hanson have always been close to the surface." In another work, entitled *A Dollar a Dot* (see Figure 4), she presents a painting entirely covered with pink dots with a dollar sign in green and green arrows pointing the way to the dollar (see Figure 4). Another of her paintings in acrylic on cardboard is the black and white work she calls *I Wish I Was White – Patrick White* (Figure 5). She references White Australia's "pride" in traditional art and the acclaimed white author Patrick White, and gives viewers Patrick White on a bark painting with black and white dots covering the cardboard and the title in white dots. It delivers a powerful punch in black and white with a humorous message, that both black and white icons are "a palatable commodity." Sardonicly, she paints with dots because White viewers expect it; at the same time, she compares the dot with the bullet which kept Aborigines in their place and suggests that White attitudes have not changed markedly.

Julie Gough is a Tasmanian Aboriginal visual artist, and a curator of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Victoria. She also uses dots except she uses a pogo stick as seemingly the only tool in the "given kit" from which she claims she makes her own Aboriginal mark because the dot is not traditionally hers to make. "Julie Gough's allegorical assemblage works principally to subvert the

historical misrepresentations of Aboriginal people” (*Black Humour* 1997). In her painting, *The Sub-Dividing Games: Pogography 2000 – Tool for Land Reclamation Vs Tools for Land Degradation* (Figure 6) she uses satire very effectively. She presents eight cushion land parcels each wrapped in the British flag with large dots presumably made with a pogo stick and in the shapes of the eight regions of Australia. These parcels are commodities representing the vision and interests of the mining, pastoralist and government fraternities, because they are easily plundered, swapped and lost. She calls her dot-making, pogography. Pogography is an act of trying to connect with the land; using a pogo stick however keeps her off the land and, in this way, she is representing her disconnectedness. She is imagining that Indigenous people will “recover and re-nurture” the parcels of land, soils and waters. But the recovery of the land has many forces working against it. She sees it as a strategy board game. This is indicated by the pogo stick being in a corner on its own whilst other contenders are playing with an entire army of tools at their disposal. So we have a tool for jumping about the land, versus other tools for “cutting, twisting, puncturing and removing land.” Both Elliott and Gough have reacted to those art critics and collectors who still regard dot paintings as the only “real” Aboriginal art.

In his sculpture of bronze, welded steel and aluminium, titled *Pauline’s Pecking Order* (Figure 7), Laurie Nilsen portrays the way he views One Nation leader, Pauline Hanson’s view of Australian society. He sees Aboriginal culture as the basis for the development of Australian society, so he uses a solid platform on which to build his art work. On this platform he has fish on sticks at varying levels or heights. The largest fish impaled on the longest stick represents the dominant and savage ideologies and practices of the Pauline Hanson phenomenon. The second fish, not quite as savage, represents the general middle class who seem to sit on the fence about land rights issues and cultural equality while all the time holding the balance of power. The small fish impaled on a spear represents the position Hanson wishes to provide for Aboriginal culture (Nilsen 1997: *Black Humour*). Nilsen says this is his way of “trivialising” the way Aborigines are placed in Australian society by using humour as a survival mechanism. “The ability to laugh at ourselves ... makes this brand of humour

unique" (Nilsen 1997: *Black Humour*). His sculpture ironically represents the low status of Aborigines in Australia.

Gordon Hookey's works are "subversions of real life, the turning around of incidents with empowerment of the disempowered." Hookey says: "Humour is implicit in all my works as I am usually dealing with confrontational issues. I use humour to make the concerns a bit more digestible, I hate being a victim or seeing my people portrayed as victims" (Hookey 1997: *Black Humour*). His paintings, *All the Natives Laughed as the Cruel Joke Was Played on Poor Li'l Pinky* (Figure 8) in oil on canvas, and *Pinklash, Backlash, Blacklash* (Figure 9) also on canvas, are a treasure trove of detail. He depicts Aboriginal people as native animals and White people as caricatures. *Poor Lil Pinky* literally reverses the story of an old Blackfella who went into a pub and had his chair pulled out from under him. He reverses the scene with Aborigines enjoying payback for Pinky. In *Pinklash, Backlash, Blacklash* a green martian in a spaceship flies across the centre and a small Hiroshima / Muraroa / Maralinga explosion is happening at the end of the kangaroo's cigar/joint. The Aboriginal man uses whatever resources are available to stop the White man in his tracks as he rides away on a horse. Running shoes seen in a corner are the getaway car, the spear is used against seemingly superior firepower. The shoes are also a reminder of Cathy Freeman's victory at the Commonwealth Games. The White man has dropped his can of coca cola. I was amused to note that the saddle cloth is the Union Jack, and the flag flying atop of Parliament House is the Stars and Stripes. Hookey ironically satirises the current situation in Australia where it is inferred that Australia has divided loyalties between the United States of America and the British Empire – but the former is clearly dominant.

In her work, *Me Me, Me and You, Emu Dreaming* (Figure 10) Bianca Beetson portrays Tank Girl female warrior ready to do what she does best; with her all-action suction cup breasts, underwater gear and effective mask offset against pink angel wings and tutu. She uses hot pink, a most "unnatural" colour very different from the traditional earth colours of Aboriginal art from, for example, the palette of the Northern Territory and Western Australia. She uses pink, an unnatural colour, to speak of unnatural things like nuclear contamination and

flammable liquids, a metaphor for warning and danger dressed up in pink sequins and ready to go to the Mardi Gras. Beetson says the expression of humour and fun in her work is very important to her. "I want to show that art can be fun, full of energy, alive and even uplifting, yet still convey a message. I want the viewer to have a good belly laugh then think about the meaning" (Beetson, *Black Humour* 1997). It can be prudent to avoid confrontation when dealing with the truth and a way to achieve this is to use humour. This advice is heeded by Beetson and has been used effectively.

In contrast, like his work, Indigenous artist Richard Bell pulls no punches and uses his art to provoke confrontation. As described by Ben Elthan (*Courier-Mail* 06-12-06), he is an unashamedly political artist whose work over the past 25 years has been both awarded and condemned. It developed out of protest politics, which he claims are still relevant in Queensland. Bell won the National Indigenous Art Award for his work, *Aboriginal Art It's a White Thing* in 2003 (Figure 11). He is a key member of West End's proppaNow collective, a group of Aboriginal artists who tackle head on the uncomfortable issue of racism in Australia. His award-winning canvas is a direct attack on the institutionalised racism of the Aboriginal Art industry. Despite the fact that the Telstra Award judge Brian Kennedy made the pronouncement that "this painting was made to win" (Tamisari 2004:96), Bell's work criticises Telstra, the institution which made the awards and seeks to promote and celebrate Aboriginal art. The painting strongly expresses frustration in a struggle "against the ... historical circumstances and local parameters which not only exploit Aboriginal artists economically but position Aboriginality before art work" (Tamisari 2004:96). In applauding Bell, Gary Foley asserts: "Thus in the final analysis, it is its humour and healthy sense of the absurd that makes Bell's work so wonderfully subversive ... the deployment of satire and ridicule ... one of the most effective means of communicating a strong message" (Gary Foley 2006:6).

At the Telstra Awards night Bell received the top award wearing a white T-shirt with the slogan "White Girls Can't Hump" written in black letters on it (Figure 12). Many people were scandalised, considering such a slogan racist and offensive to women. Franca Tamisari explains: "What disturbs the VIPs at the

Award and others who are outraged, is to return racism to the sender and to do it in the context of sex" (Tamisari 2004:98). She further adds that what disturbs is the announcement of a refusal to acknowledge a long history of sexual violence against black women and men: "the Black velvet attraction and the consequent emasculation of Black men." What also disturbs "is the boldness with which this statement so powerfully replies to all the racist ... and patronising remarks about Aboriginal people which are not written on T-shirts but are said and heard on a day to day basis" (Tamisari 2004:98). In other words, the slogan is shocking because it confronts racial vilification for what it is, real encounters "close to the skin." Jane Rankin makes these comments: "I celebrate Richard Bell's gutsy 'in-ya-face' intellectual boisterousness. I mean how long has it been since you heard an artist declare, 'I'm not racist but some of my best friends are White'" (Rankin-Reid 2003:78). Aileen Moreton-Robinson's sentiments in regard to the statement on Bell's T-shirt resonate with the previous comments: "The White woman is available to the Black man, she is not White man's property. The Black man's rejection symbolises the resistance of Indigenous people to the seduction of White man's patriarchal sovereignty. Bell's work is a powerful statement of Indigenous sovereignty" (Moreton-Robinson 2006:83).

In June 2005 the Australian Army took disciplinary action against those involved in a photograph of a group of soldiers in Darwin wearing white hoods similar to those of the Ku Klux Klan. Aboriginal artist Fiona Foley's series HHH (Figure 13), which stands for Hedonistic Honky Haters, was produced in New York in 2004, prior to the Darwin incident, but the photographic instance serves to remind us of the persistent and institutionalised racism in everyday Australian life, which the perpetrators at this particular event defended as a joke. Former Prime Minister John Howard defended it at the time with the statement: "Boys will be boys," and former Defence Minister Brendan Nelson deemed: "I suspect a lot of it is letting off steam and a bit of larrikin irreverence." Most of us would concur with the then opposition Defence spokesman Joel Fitzgibbon's view that Mr Howard and Dr Nelson "frivolously dismissed the incident," even though commander Brigadier Craig Orme said he was revolted by it (*SMH* 06-08-2005).

Fiona Foley's photographic series "adopts the conventions of ethnographic studio portraiture," suggests the Monash Gallery of Art website. Linda Carroli says that, as viewers of these photographs, we do not see them as pictures: "but rather we are reminded of freedom rides. Sorry day. Freedom from hatred and freedom from the shackles of White virtue" (Carroli 2005). It is possible to see representations of race and colour because the HHH in Foley's work have brown eyes and brown skin and are wearing black hoods and richly "ethnic" patterned robes. When in New York, Foley became aware that the HHH did exist and was founded in 1965 as a secret society. Their activities included clandestine meetings at places throughout the United States. It is not active today, but she found seven members who became the subjects of her photographic series that featured in her *Strange Fruit* exhibition in Brisbane in 2006. Carroli observes that: "Hedonistic Honky Haters are not so much mirror images of the Ku Klux Klan but an inflection – a kind of right back to you brother. You can see it might be humorous but the laugh knots in your throat" (Carroli 2006). Like the art of Bell, Foley's confronts the vilification of Aboriginal people which continues, not always covertly, today.

Another work by Foley that is of interest is *Black Velvet* (see Figure 14), displayed in her exhibition, *Strange Fruit*. The expression "Black Velvet" relates to the late nineteenth century where it signified the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by White men. The work consists of nine cloth dillybags with diamond elliptical vaginal shapes in black and red appliqué on a beige ground. Joan Winter's review describes the art work as a "beguilingly simple conceptual work which carries her story, the burden of Black womanhood in Queensland at the height of the frontier conflict in the 1870s and 1880s" (Winter, cited in Foley 2006:5). Ruby Langford relates a humorous anecdote about "Black velvet" that I discussed earlier, but she does not provide the stark history of the term. Like Richard Bell and others mentioned in this chapter, Fiona Foley displays a political edge in her work. The question that arises here might be to consider how this political edge in art differs from the general use of humour in art. I would surmise that humour cannot be avoided if a political message is to be made in art and the artists mentioned here want to make political statements. Gary Foley states in his essay on Bell's work: "The deployment of satire and

ridicule is one of the most effective means of communicating a strong message about Australian society” (Gary Foley 2006:6). It is clear here that a great deal of the humour in Aboriginal art is not just, or even primarily, about self-expression but is more about doing something to change conditions of racist domination.

The work of Destiny Deacon is important here. Since the early 1990s she has been exhibiting widely both locally and internationally. She is an artist/photographer, actress, writer and broadcaster but, above all, she is a versatile and creative practitioner of her trade. Like many other Aboriginal artists, Deacon draws widely from suburban culture and personal experience. She has been using the term “blak” since 1991 with her work *Blak like me*. For this segment I will focus on her work *Walk and don’t look blak*, her first exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. This work provides an insight into her “incisive” and humorous world view. She used friends and family as well as her vast collection of “Aboriginalia” to assemble and create, “uncanny, beautiful, frightening and funny vignettes” of contemporary Aboriginal life. Grounded in her long involvement in Indigenous and feminist politics, “Deacon’s work examines how language and representation can be both tools of oppression and ammunition for resistance” (Macgregor, 2004:2). The exhibition title derives its name from a song of the 1960s by the African American group, The Temptations, “Walk and Don’t Look Back.”

Reviewing Deacon’s work in 1997, Marcia Langton describes her as: “The committed satirist, alerting us to the messages of contempt and derision for Aboriginal men, women and children in Australia’s colonial and post-colonial iconography,” and argues that “to really understand her work it is almost essential to have lived in a share household ... to have been poor, very poor ... and to have been marginalised from the discourses of power” (Langton 1997:100).

Although urban and regional “blaks” were making inroads into dance, music, literature and theatre in the 1970s, it took until the mid-1980s for photographers Tracey Moffatt and Brenda L. Croft to enter the visual arts scene. For Deacon, this was the catalyst for her to refine her art. She explains: “I was aware of our traditional Indigenous arts, crafts and culture but the contemporary

visual art world was like another planet for someone from my background” (Deacon 2004:7). When asked by artist and film maker Virginia Fraser if the humour in her work – which sometimes is “pretty bleak, sometimes whimsical, often ironic” – was calculated, her response was: “I’ve never thought of this. First I labour for an idea, one that usually ends up being sad or pathetic and then during the agony process ... somehow things take a turn towards the ironic. Humour cuts deep. I like to think there is a laugh and a tear in each picture” (Deacon 2004:9).

Langton informs us that Deacon’s pain is thinly disguised by her irreverent Black humour and trash archaeology, noting that she owns an “enviable collection” of ashtrays and other mementos from the 1950s depicting lubras and piccaninnies. Deacon states she found the kind of kitsch used in her work in second-hand shops in the 1970s. She explains: “I felt sorry for the objects and wanted to rescue them – bring them to another level” (Deacon 2004:8). But it seems clear to Langton, in relation to the objects, that Deacon is “interrogating” the past and that they are a reminder of a painful history of “bigotry and disempowerment.” She asserts that Deacon’s displays and installations enable us to understand that past history. An example of this is pointed out by Langton in the installation *Welcome to Never Never* 1995, which consists of a museum glass cabinet display containing “White Australian Aboriginal artifacts.” The trash and kitsch stand in for the degrading history of White representations of Aboriginal people, particularly women and children (“or in the language of the settlers, lubras and piccaninnies”). The tea towels and garden ornaments depicting the vanquished natives, Langton claims, are emblems of suburban security. They help to define what it means to be White in Australia (Langton 1997:104).

Deacon’s *Adoption* (Figure 16) presents the viewer with “a tray of black plastic toy babies dropped in paper patties that resemble an offering of chocolate crackles that one might find at a children’s party.” The image gives a reminder of the Stolen Generation, when government agencies removed Aboriginal children from their families and offered them to White families for adoption. “Through these kitsch dollies, Deacon exposes patronising and condescending ideas about Aborigines by offering up a tray of babies to the viewer. The image also relates to

the practice of some non-Indigenous couples of 'shopping' or 'snacking' at orphanages for coloured babies" (Deacon 2004:17). An example of the privilege of Whiteness as a highly valued and exclusive form of property is starkly drawn in Deacon's work *Over the Fence 2000* (Figure 15). In this portrayal it is implied that Whiteness permits membership of an exclusive club, and this privilege is closely guarded. In presenting a poignant image of a little Black girl looking over a fence she has captured an image of real life experiences for many Aboriginal people and rekindled youthful memories. It certainly reminded me of the times during my childhood when I was excluded from joining my White peers in the swimming pool, at birthday parties and in games such as skipping or on the tennis court. For Darryl French, lecturer in Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University, the image took him back to his childhood in Moree: "So many kids I was raised with and myself can remember very strongly the times we stood on boxes, climbed trees, pressed our faces against the wire fence at the town baths ... watching White kids playing and laughing while swimming in the pool" (Deacon 2004:12). Where is the humour in this image, one might ask – but for Deacon there is a "laugh and a tear" in every photograph. She relies on satire, irony and ridicule as powerful tools to expose the treatment of people or groups who are marginalised or politically dispossessed. For me this image evoked "if I don't laugh I'll cry" sentiments.

In moving on to address Black humour in film, attention will first be given to Langton's ideas about co-production. In 1993 she recommended that film makers should consider co-production. She states that there is a naïve belief that Aboriginal people make better representations of themselves simply because being Aboriginal gives greater understanding. She refutes this idea, claiming that it is based on an ancient feature of racism: "The assumption is that all Aborigines are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference and so on." This, she says, is a demand for censorship based upon the belief that: "There is a right way to be Aboriginal, and any Aboriginal film or video producer will necessarily make a true representation of Aboriginality" (Langton 1993:27). She argues thus: "It is clearly unrealistic for Aboriginal people to expect that others will stop portraying us in photographs, films, on television ... and so on." She advises that,

rather than demanding the impossible, it would be more useful to identify those areas where it is possible to control input. The involvement of Aboriginal people in the making of film and video has increased since 1979 and according to Langton, when viewed in hindsight can be seen as a minor revolution (Langton 1993:23). I will discuss several selected films either produced/directed by Indigenous people or which include Indigenous input and collaboration.

The production *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) was directed by Tracey Moffatt, and is a stylised look at the complex power dynamics between Aboriginal women and European men that have evolved since Europeans arrived in Australia. The title references Aretha Franklin's *Evil Girl Blues* and the song is heard in the film. The film was hailed by Karen Jennings and David Hollinsworth as "break[ing] new ground, stylistically and thematically." It uses a powerful irony. "*Nice Coloured Girls* is a celebration of the perceptiveness, ingenuity, skills and sexual power of Aboriginal women in white Australia. ... Moffatt highlights the extent to which these women have sought to combat their oppression and to maximise their advantage and control" (Jennings and Hollinsworth 1987/88:133, 129).

The setting for this film is primarily urban and the three Aboriginal women are in their element as they cruise through Kings Cross (Sydney) to pick up a "Captain." This film presents some not-so-nice coloured girls who get a White man drunk and then roll him for his money. They encourage him to spend his money on them, and to drink until inebriated; they then steal his wallet and race off to catch a taxi. The sound track enables the film to cross through various time frames from Lieutenant William Bradley's impressions in 1788, through voiceovers and sound effects, including visuals fading in and out from colour to black and white and then to sepia and vice versa. In the bar scene, the assumed power dynamic where White men dominate Black women is reversed. The early days of white colonisation are evoked through the diary of observations about Aboriginal women from a White man.

Here the Black women are in control and the intoxicated White man is disempowered. Perhaps the film maker is signalling that there have always been pockets of Black power, but I prefer to think that the film implies revenge and payback for the sexual exploitation of Black women. White men took advantage

without commitment, and I place little value on the argument that this was due to the fact that at the beginning of White settlement, in rural areas especially, there was an uneven gender base. It needs to be understood that the coloniser needed the colonised, particularly in sexual relations, to dominate and keep them in subjection. I cannot help smiling when I read Destiny Deacon's announcement at the Tudawali Award during Artists' Week in Adelaide in 1994. She told the audience: "Lisa and I might have been born whiter, but our mums outran the missionaries." Lisa to whom she refers is another Indigenous woman, who was also present at the ceremony. We have learnt that not only did the colonisers sexually exploit Aboriginal women, but Christian missionaries did too.

The film *Radiance* (1998), from an original play by a White man, Louis Nowra, and directed by Rachel Perkins, also features a story line about Aboriginal women. The abuse of Black women by White men, the loss of heritage, culture and land, and the breakup of families are ever-present realities in the lives of many Aboriginal women. *Radiance* tells the story of three sisters who come together for their mother's funeral in North Queensland. They are played by Rachael Maza (Cessy), Deborah Mailman (Noni) and Trisha Morton-Thomas (Mae). *Radiance* offers a window on the lives of Aboriginal Australians, an "insight that celebrates resilience and humour as ensuring survival in the face of adversity." It successfully mixes laughter with tears. There is much humour and a lot of pain before the sisters are able to lay the past to rest and move forward together.

In my opinion this film captures the practice of humour in the everyday life of Aborigines, especially when coping with pain, hardship or grief. There is always someone in the group or gathering who relieves a grave situation through jocularity, facetiousness or flippancy. In this film, the youngest sister Noni plays the trouble-shooter. She is portrayed as artless and hedonistic; on the other hand her one-liners are witty, sometimes showing surprising insight. Noni's mockery of Mae's single status is sprinkled with sexual innuendo and reaches its height when, to Mae's disgust, she feigns having an orgasm. Tired of Mae's cheerlessness and dreary expressions she taunts: "You need an enema," to which Mae quickly retorts: "Why should I when you give me the shits!" After the three

women attend their mother's funeral service, Noni wonders why the townsfolk stayed away. She asks Mae: "Didn't you send out RSPCAs?" Later she suggests that they have a beer at the hotel. Cressy says haughtily, "I don't drink beer." Unabashed Noni answers, "Well we'll drink champagne." Cressy, an opera singer, has to get back to Sydney straight away, but Noni contrives to make her miss her plane. Cressy decides to wait at the airport for the next flight that night, rather than returning home with her sisters. Mae drives off in a huff but, at Noni's pleading, returns to find Cressy in a statuesque pose showing no sign of being aware that her sisters had returned. After a while Mae calls out: "What do you want, a standing ovation?"

Another amusing scene is when their mother's ashes are spilt during a tug-of-war between Noni and Mae. Noni exclaims: "You've spilt mum on the floor," and Cressy, who has some ashes spilt on her expensive suit remarks: "I'll have to tell the laundry that this is not a stain but it is my mum."

Finally, the truth comes out when Cressy is pushed to the limit and she informs Noni that she is her mother and that she was raped by one of her mother's boyfriends. Noni is devastated to hear that the woman she always thought was her sister is actually her "real" mother. At the end of the film she accepts Cressy. With a twinkle in her eyes and a cheeky grin, she says: "No fucking way I am going to call you mum." This reminds me of a story that my mother told me, that was another good example of the use of humour to ease tension. My mother and her brother, accompanied by his dog Burima, met at the local registry office to be witnesses to the marriage of their sister and her soon-to-be husband. After a nervous wait outside it was discovered that there was no wedding ring! My uncle declared, "I don't know what you can do. The only ring we can use is Burima's;" this broke the tension and relieved the anxiety. My mother did not tell me how they managed in the end, but it was usual in those days of the Great Depression for the wife of the registrar to lend her own wedding ring and I expect this eventually happened in this case.

Tracey Rigney's *Endangered* started as a gag between friends. *Endangered* (screened on SBS in 2006) is the second documentary of the four-part series *Loved Up*, which was initiated to let some of the country's leading directors

explore contemporary Indigenous stories that encompass themes of love, belonging, Aboriginality, family and identity. Adelaide playwright Rigney explains in an interview with Sarah Nicholson in the *Courier-Mail* (17-05-06) that the concept of *Endangered* had its genesis when she was sitting around with her mates, laughing about the fact that there were not enough eligible Black men to go around: "the whole idea came from a joke I was having with my sister girls in Melbourne." She goes on to say: "We were talking about the fact that there weren't enough deadly Black men ... when we thought about it ... it wasn't a joke ... why was there a shortage?" (Nicholson 2006).

The programme features a group of Indigenous men and women who discuss what they look for in a mate and the issues that make it harder to find someone from their own cultural group. Rigney suggested that kinship eliminates a number of otherwise eligible partners.

I discussed this documentary with my friend L., another Indigenous woman, and I asked her what she thought might contribute to the lack of deadly Black men. She replied that there are some Black men who talk Black but sleep White. She clarified this by saying that some Black men will talk passionately about Black issues but prefer to sleep with White women. Then she launched into a chant "Jacky-Jacky, lackey-lackey." We both ended in gales of laughter at the dilemma of Black women; first they were sexually exploited by White men and now it seems they are rejected by Black men.

The film *Kooris in the Mist* produced by Pauline Whyman and directed by Mark Stewart, is a parody of *Gorillas in the Mist*, with some reference also to *The Gods Must be Crazy* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. This film is about a group of rural Aborigines who come across a magic hubcap that transports them to the city where they find themselves in well- paid jobs. Eventually they want to return home but this is impossible until they find the magic Holden hubcap. It is significant that the hubcap must be from a Holden car. Many Aborigines who live or come from rural communities will identify with the battered and old, but affordable car. The film transmits several messages such as loneliness in a city deprived of family and kinship support, the yearning for familiar customs and culture, or the inability to adapt to changed and foreign circumstances. Having

well-paid jobs does not make up for the loss of these things when what is really lost is identity.

Chris Healy's paper entitled "In the Beginning Was Captain Cook" is a useful reference to introduce the discussion of the next film, *Too Many Captain Cooks* (1989). Healey describes the name of Captain Cook as "an enduring icon about which narratives, images and ceremonies seek to articulate a common reference for Australian historical culture" (Healy 1997: n.p.). In the beginning was Cook! The name Cook has secured a particular and privileged place in Australian history by White Australians. "Cook has been codified in texts, pictorial images, place names and porcelain, in commemorations and coins, stamps, poetry, drama and fiction" (Healy 1997:n.p.). Captain Cook had become a discoverer who founded a nation.

But in 1970, at Cook's small cottage in Melbourne, Aboriginal people in a demonstration remembered Cook not as the founding father but as "the harbinger of dispossession and death, a sign of white amnesia." Cook did not bring Aborigines into history except in the sense of history as knowledge which refers only to Europe; but as Healy points out, Cook may mark a kind of beginning of an epoch. His name has been used by Aboriginal people as a means of accounting for certain kinds of change and as a metaphor for ethical dilemmas. His name has "been publicly circulated as oral testimony, myth, legend history and protest in film" (Healy 1997:n.p.), as well as in paintings and song. Healy suggests:

Aboriginal histories of Cook interpret the past as forms of analogies and structural correspondences with the hopes and tribulations of the present ... In these histories we hear a whole range of alternative forms and plots which handle time/space differently, experiment with identity differently, juggle continuity and discontinuity differently and take as their structures not progress or heroism, but morality, culture, land and law. (Healy 1997:n.p.)

These representations of Cook challenge the interpretation in the European imagination of Cook "as the embodiment of a trinity – discovery / possession / heritage" (Healy 1997: n.p.). In the film *Too Many Captain Cooks*, a history of colonisation is retold to similar effect, from the point of view of the Aboriginal

people of Arnhem Land in Northern Australia, where a “Captain Cook” means a White man. In this film, Paddy Wainburranga takes the viewers step by step through the making of a bark painting. The bark painting describes the way in which Captain Cook was welcomed here but, alas, too many Captain Cooks followed him and soon after things took a turn for the worse with the ensuing disruption to cultural life. The film moves at a languid and seemingly aimless pace but, just when the credits roll in, the viewers realise that they can “read” the bark painting. They have become literate! Finally, the joke is, that in the beginning there was *no* Captain Cook. Story-telling in traditional times was a fine art. Story-tellers had to be gifted in the art of oratory because the journey of the story can be slow and even tedious. This film stresses that patience yields results, and all will be revealed in the end.

The next film to be discussed here, entitled *Two Bob Mermaid* (1996), was produced by Antonia Barnard, and directed by Indigenous student Darlene Johnson. The title recalls the film *Million Dollar Mermaid* (1952) starring Esther Williams, about a polio-stricken Australian girl named Annette. This film is set in the 1950s when Aborigines were not allowed in public swimming pools. It tells the story of an Aboriginal girl, Koorine, who dreams of winning a swimming competition. The irony relates to how this girl can possibly swim, let alone train to compete, in the public swimming pool. The story conjures up for me the image of a little Black girl looking over the fence at White kids swimming and frolicking in the public swimming pool. It also recalls Destiny Deacon’s previously discussed photograph depicting wistful resignation to rejection, entitled *Over the Fence* (Figure 15). Ironically the unattainable can be attained if one passes for White. The film is about identity, transformation and change, and is set in cultural conflict and racial tension. This again is an example of how the property of Whiteness enables one to be a member of an exclusive club.

Reference was made above to the weapons of the weak, which James Scott identified as foot dragging, false compliance, feigned ignorance, sabotage and the rest. These practices are common the world over among oppressed peoples. The film *The Tracker* (2002), starring David Gulpilil, epitomises the use of the weapons of the weak. It is also a good example of co-production as called for by

Langton, in that the skills of the White producer and his camera crew are matched with the acting skills and canoe making (as in the film *Ten Canoes*) of the Aboriginal members of the cast. The intelligence and cunning of the Black tracker in outwitting and outsmarting the White men is showcased very cleverly, and is demonstrated through potent dialogue of satire and irony.

Four men, three White men on horseback and an Aboriginal tracker on foot pursue an Aborigine suspected to have killed a White woman. The four men are The Fanatic, The Follower, The Veteran and The Tracker. The Tracker keeps the group some distance behind the fugitive. The White men have only the Tracker to guide them, and he is always a step ahead of them in his actions of false compliance and feigned ignorance. Gulpilil, a clever and entertaining actor, plays the part of innocently manipulating the White men with consummate ease. For instance, the question arises as to whether the Tracker's pausing periodically for sacred dance and chanting is merely a delaying tactic or the way he always traditionally works. The viewer is led to believe it is a warning to the fugitive close by.

When the White men's patience was tested by the Tracker repeatedly informing them that the fugitive was half a day ahead, he quickly replied "no boss we are half a day behind". When the Fanatic declares, "He could be around the next bend behind a tree," with a spring in his step The Tracker chortles, "Come on boss, we'll find that tree."

The scene in which the White men slaughter a group of Aborigines is full of tension. The Follower is overcome with remorse and horror at what they have done, but the Fanatic is remorseless in telling him why the massacre had to happen: "They are cannibals, treacherous. Will kill a man in broad daylight." The Tracker who was quietly watching and listening broke the tension saying: "Too much bull artist, yakking boss, we'll have to keep after that savage" and, in helping the Follower to his feet, said: "No such thing as an innocent Black, the only innocent Black is a dead Black," and burst into peals of laughter.

When the Tracker refuses to budge another step after the Fanatic orders that the wounded Veteran be left behind, he receives a brutal whipping for his

insubordination by the Fanatic who threatens: "You'll hang for this when we get back." The Tracker replies: "Yes boss, Black fellow has been born for that noose;" this is followed by guffaws of laughter which in turn set off laughter from the Fanatic. This is nervous, "gallows humour," with commiseration between unlikely allies about the law on the Frontier. It takes on a dramatic irony in the light of what happens soon after to the Fanatic.

After aimless trekking seemingly in circles, the Fanatic exclaims: "Why up and down, always over rough areas?" This is answered with: "Can't help where Blackfellow goes. Dumb Blackfellas sure are slippery." Later that night around the campfire the Tracker remarks: "Nearly had him, hey boss. Nearly caught that bastard savage today."

Following the dramatic hanging of the Fanatic and the fugitive receiving tribal justice and punishment, the Follower and the Tracker return to the camp to find the body of the Fanatic missing. The Tracker suggests: "Black fellows probably cooked him and ate him, you know we're all cannibals," amid more peals of laughter. When they part at the point where the Follower can find his way home and the Tracker to his country, the White man calls out: "I wonder who did kill that White woman." The Tracker replies: "Probably a White fellow. They murderous, shifty thieving dishonest mob. Can't trust them!" Humour works disturbingly in this film and, in a highly original way, projects the Tracker as a humorist.

Another good example of the co-production Langton advocates is the film *Ten Canoes* (2006), directed by Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr, and the people of Raminginning. This film is described in the program handout available at the cinema box office as: "One of the most intriguing Australian films in years." It also informs the potential audience that: "From its first frames *Ten Canoes* announces itself as a film like no other." Other comments from *Screen International* are: "A delightful sense of fun;" "Irreverent ... Mischievous ... Revealing," "Laugh out loud funny," "Delightful humour ... Gorgeous ... First class." The film, set a thousand years ago, begins with the prologue narrated by David Gulpilil. His delivery is very impressive and at the same time it is compelling in the sense that one must listen keenly to every word:

'Bout time to tell you a story, eh? Then I'll tell you one of ours ... It is long time ago ... It's a good story I'm gonna be tellin' you 'bout the ancient ones ... ahh you gotta see this story of mine cause it'll make you laugh, even if you're not a Blackfella. Might cry a bit too eh? But then you laugh some more ... cause this story is a big true story of my people. True thing.

David Gulpilil asked film director Rolf de Heer to make a film about his people on their tribal lands near Raminginning in the Northern Territory. Their country is the beautiful Arafura Swamp in Central Arnhem Land. The inspiration for the film the people wanted to make came from a series of photographs taken in the 1930s by the noted anthropologist/photographer Donald Thomson. These photographs depict life as it was, as it had been for thousands of years. The people of the swamp region now living in towns, are proud of their heritage. They wanted to bring it back to show their children and the world their culture.

After two years of developing the script with Rolf de Heer and creating artifacts needed for the film, the ten canoeists plus the film crew followed in the steps of Donald Thomson and set out onto the swamp to create an amazing film with equally amazing images. *Ten Canoes* is the result of a collaboration almost as extraordinary as the film itself.

A discussion of two films I viewed early in 2010 will now complete this chapter.

Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah* (2009) is set in an isolated community in the central Australian desert, and filmed around Alice Springs. I found it bleak and depressing except for odd moments when humour worked to provide relief, such as when Delilah made furtive raids on the grocery shelves at the supermarket and avoided the checkout, or when Samson's early efforts to win Delilah's affections were ignored. But the most poignant scene was under the bridge where a deranged, homeless man, Gonzo, shared his space, fireside and home-spun philosophies with Samson and Delilah. I can relate this scene to Kenneth Lincoln's comments about Native American humour which I addressed earlier in this thesis. He highlights the comic survival of what he terms "the loser's humour." He describes it as bleak comedy where Indians have one another for better or worse, and their humour is "born of the poor, dispossessed and desperate" (Lincoln 1993:164).

The musical *Bran Nue Dae* was discussed above, and apart from minor changes, the storyline remains the same in the film. *Bran Nue Dae* boasts an all-star cast that includes Geoffrey Rush, Deborah Mailman, Magda Szubanski, Ernie Dingo and Missy Higgins. Director Rachel Perkins describes the film as “comedy, cheeky, madcap.” She told Alyssa Braithwaite of the *National Indigenous Times* that she felt proud to represent the other side of Aboriginal experience on the screen:

The glue that holds Indigenous communities, families and people together is humour. That is not seen a lot in depictions of Indigenous people, but it’s our great survival mechanism and it’s the thing that really defines us in a way. (Braithwaite 2009:53)

When Diane Plater from the *Koori Mail* asked her if the film had a political message she answered:

“There is an undercurrent of history and politics that runs under the film, but it’s only there for the people who really understand it and have an insight into those things. Other people can just watch it as a funny comedy/road movie and hopefully that’s the success of it.” (Plater 2009:53)

The success and enjoyment of this film lie in its capacity to speak to people on different levels.

In conclusion, this chapter has highlighted the employment of humour in the works of Black visual artists and film-makers. It is clear that they have successfully exercised their talents for humour in the contemporary urban art scene to showcase their perceptions of the world in which they live, and this includes exploring and reinforcing identity, enhancing self-esteem, counteracting White opinion, correcting White attitudes and reconstructing/deconstructing the White history of settlement in Australia. They do this with humour, satire and irony and these in turn serve as a catharsis in the healing process following the loss and grief which has been the experience of many Indigenous people.

In ways sometimes reminiscent of the philosophical teaching of Paolo Freire that the dominated must use some of the dimensions of the culture in power in their struggle for empowerment, Black visual artists have made their assault on the art world.

This chapter represents processes of resistance in that Indigenous artists, using humour with the best of the institutional skills and technologies of the coloniser, speak out. It is a long way from the humour strategies of traditional days when such outlets were not accessible.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

My argument in this thesis has been that Aborigines resorted to humour as a strategy for coping with the onslaught of the British invasion in 1778. In assessing the premise that humour was a vital element of Aboriginal culture, it was ascertained that humour was, indeed, embedded in Aboriginal culture for thousands of years as a vital strategy for the maintenance of social control. It had significant status in Aboriginal culture and I believe it was given a spiritual quality. How otherwise could Aboriginal people have survived the onslaught of invasion, dispossession, powerlessness and oppression for more than two hundred years? The use of humour, because of its embeddedness in the traditional past, has persisted and sustained Aborigines until the present day. But while it has had to adapt to changing circumstances, Indigenous humour today has some definite links with the traditions of the past.

To set the stage for this study it was necessary to look at the emotions. In a review of the literature it was found that humour and the emotions were inextricably entwined and are a vital part of human interactions. A brief discussion of some other cultural groups provided some evidence that this is so. Humour prevailed in these cultures and was a life-raft when their lives were subject to dispossession, powerlessness and oppression. In the case of the Irish and the Native Americans, invasion was experienced, but they survived. Shmuley Boteach argues that intellect separates us from the world whereas emotions connect us to it. In other words, the mind might help us understand another's pain but the emotions allow us to feel it (Boteach 2000:32).

Reverting to Aboriginal humour, it is useful to revisit the past in order to get facts into perspective. In comparison with the British or Europeans, Aborigines were a deeply spiritual people whose religion was manifested through day-to-day observance of the law through ritual and mythic expression. An intrinsic part of their spirituality was a strong emotional attachment to the land. The British had no concept of Aboriginal culture as a culture of the mind based upon kinship with the land. In traditional Aboriginal societies humour was a powerful strategy for self-regulation and remains prominent in daily face-to-face relations today.

Its adaptation to be a strategy for survival in the context of European dominance was achieved through the continuity of thousands of years from its roots in the distant past to the way it is expressed today.

European policy and its impact on the personal and collective lives of Aborigines since White settlement has been addressed in the thesis and is illustrated by an comments upon the way that changing policies were reflected in the lives of Aborigines including those of my own kin and, to a certain extent, my own life.

The social condition of Aboriginal people was deplorable by most standards of natural justice. They were rendered powerless by White oppression and racist institutions. They had nothing left to resist the dominance of European culture except their humour which I have described as a centrally important weapon of the weak. I reiterate here that, of all the forms of courage, humour and the ability to laugh is the most profoundly therapeutic.

Aborigines had to contend with the loss of identity from the onset of European occupation of their land. The loss of identity meant impoverishment of the soul, misery, loneliness, spiritual disconnection from the land and loss of dignity. The denial of our human dignity is without doubt the primary source of human misery. Furthermore, Boteach informs us that tyrants long understood that if you wish to control persons, you must destroy their dignity by invalidating their individuality. He cited the Nazi treatment of Jews in World War Two, when names were substituted with numbers. Once they taught their victims to cease thinking in terms of their own dignified selves, all resistance would vanish (Boteach 2000:167). Aboriginal loss of identity is an example of the misery that results from meaninglessness, and lives being considered inconsequential.

Aborigines, gradually but painfully, gained access to the dominant education system and used its skills to speak out against their unjust treatment in this country. They gradually broke free of the culture of silence that followed the invasion, and set about achieving empowerment. A breakthrough came about when they were able to use the tools of the oppressors, mainly education in the beginning, by starting to write and have their works published. This new weapon empowered them but it was cathartic as well. Evidenced in Black literature and

other cultural production is that humour was a life-raft in the midst of sorrow and depression. Being able to write about it displayed the cathartic value of humour.

As Aborigines began the journey toward empowerment and liberation by adopting some of the dimensions of the culture of the oppressors, they turned to theatre and drama. Black theatre was the first theatre in Australia as evident in corroborees, story-telling and ritual where the natural talent for mimicry was emphasised. The Black Theatre movement became a strong agent for empowerment as humour went through another phase and met new challenges. The humour in Aboriginal cultural production is achieved through deploying satire and irony, in using the skills and technologies of the coloniser. Poets in performance and writing increased their audiences, as did, in particular, three important anthologies of Black writing. Black novelists have become increasingly known and widely read.

The chapter on Aboriginal visual art documents a high a point in that Indigenous artists, using humour with the best of the institutional skills and the technologies of the mainstream, have gained substantial recognition in Australia. The involvement of Aboriginal people in the making of art, film and videos has increased rapidly since 1979. The 2013 Logie Awards showcased this, and not only celebrated Indigenous artists and actors, but recognised that they have become part of Australia's cultural mainstream.

In 1992, Julie Vance wrote in her column in the *Sunday Telegraph* that hearty laughter increases our ability to fight infection and quotes Carmen Moran of Sydney University's Faculty of Health Sciences who points out that that scientific research increasingly proves that people with a sense of humour were likely to be less stressed and, thus, have both a better resistance to illnesses such as influenza and other infections and are more psychologically robust. When we laugh we also release endorphins. Endorphins provide a feeling of well-being and, as the philosopher Bertrand Russell maintained, "laughter is the most effective wonder drug and a universal medicine" (Vance 1992). It is interesting to note that modern medicine stresses the value of humour, but Aborigines knew this and it was an essential part of their culture when the colonisers arrived.

My thesis tells us that belief in the connectedness of self to life and the universe adds meaning to our lives and that happiness is a motivating force in what we do in life. My family and other Indigenous people who were part of my childhood, living in poverty, were generally most happy in comparison with the wider community; the greatest things in life are the simplest, and happiness is a simple formula. I go on to add that human beings possess the unique spiritual capacity and resilience to overcome the vicissitudes of life. There is nothing that brings out our humanity as much as a sense of humour. Indeed, humour, joy and happiness is when humans are most spiritual.

In the study of cultures it is important to take a holistic approach. I believe this has been found wanting in most ethnographic studies of Aboriginal cultures, specifically in the area of humour and the important role it performs. It is my hope that this thesis will go some way towards bridging the gap.

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APPENDIX

Illustrations



Figure [1] Fiona Foley, *Dispersed* (2008)

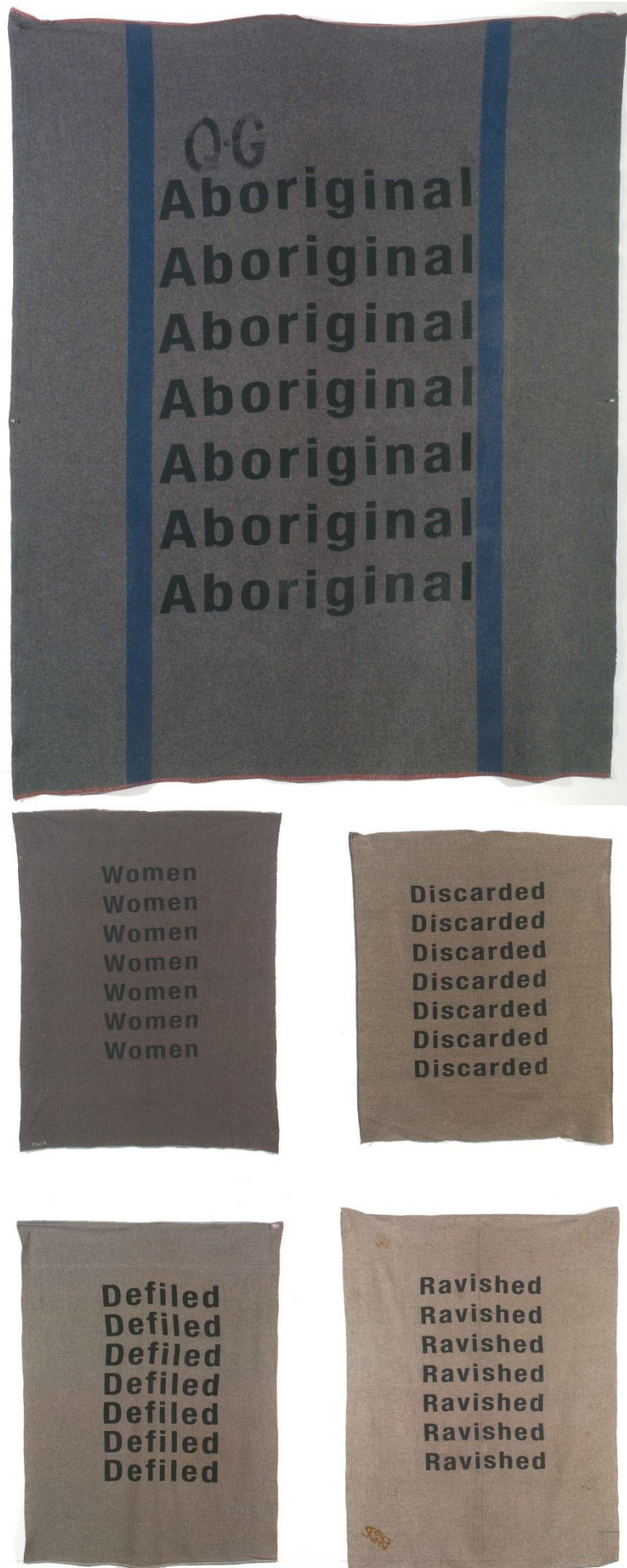
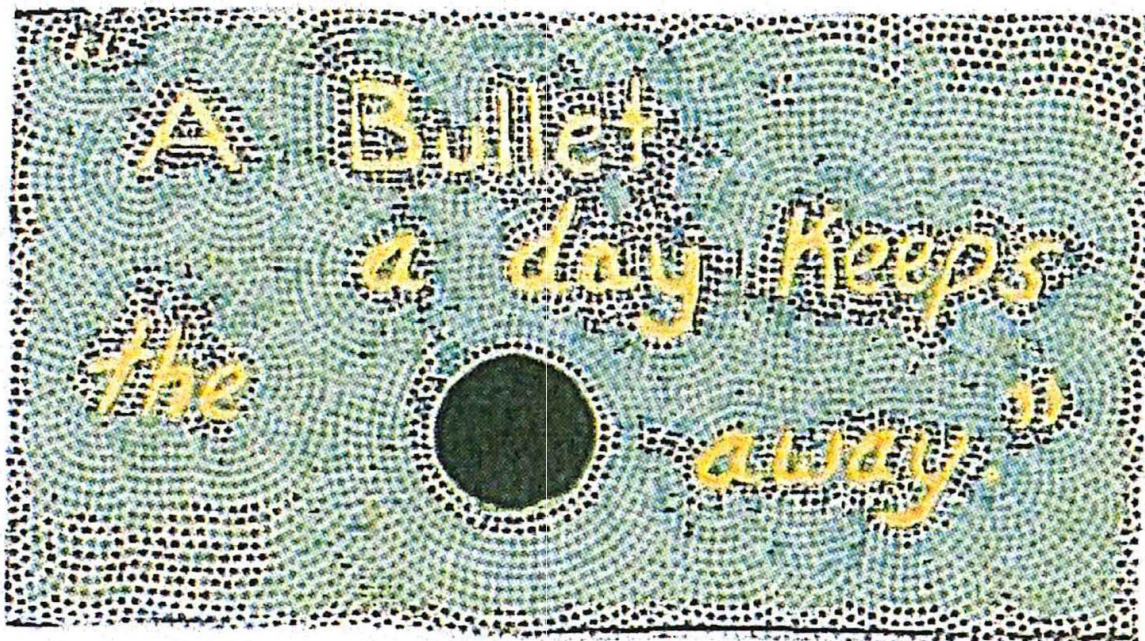


Figure [2] Fiona Foley, *Stud Gins* (2003).



A BULLET A DAY KEEPS THE • AWAY ACRYLIC ON CARDBOARD



A DOLLAR A DOT ACRYLIC ON CARDBOARD

Figure [3 & 4] Sue Elliot, *A Bullet A Day Keeps the. Away* and *A Dollar A Dot* (1997).

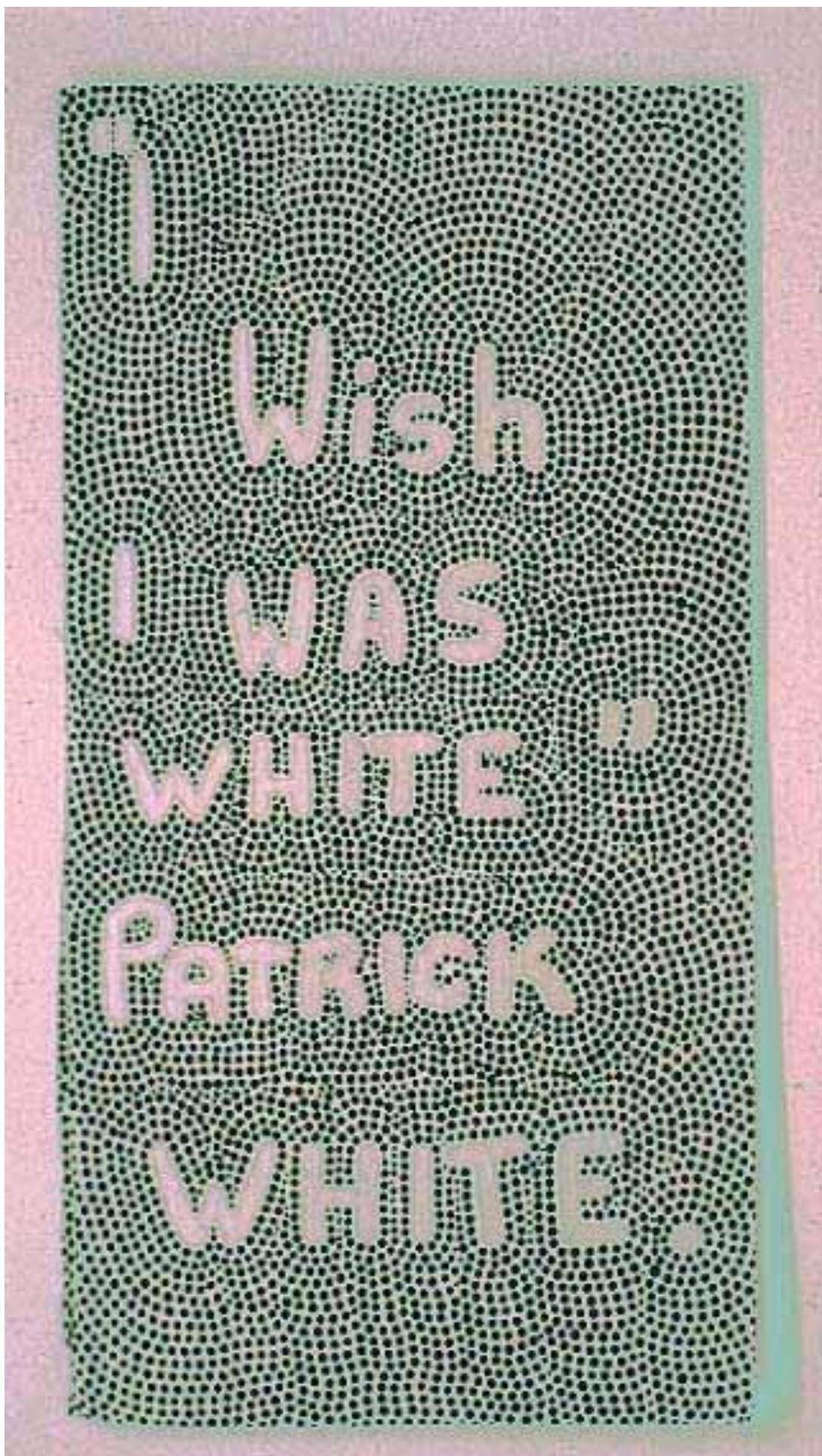


Figure [5] Sue Elliot, *"I Wish I Was White" Patrick White* (1997).

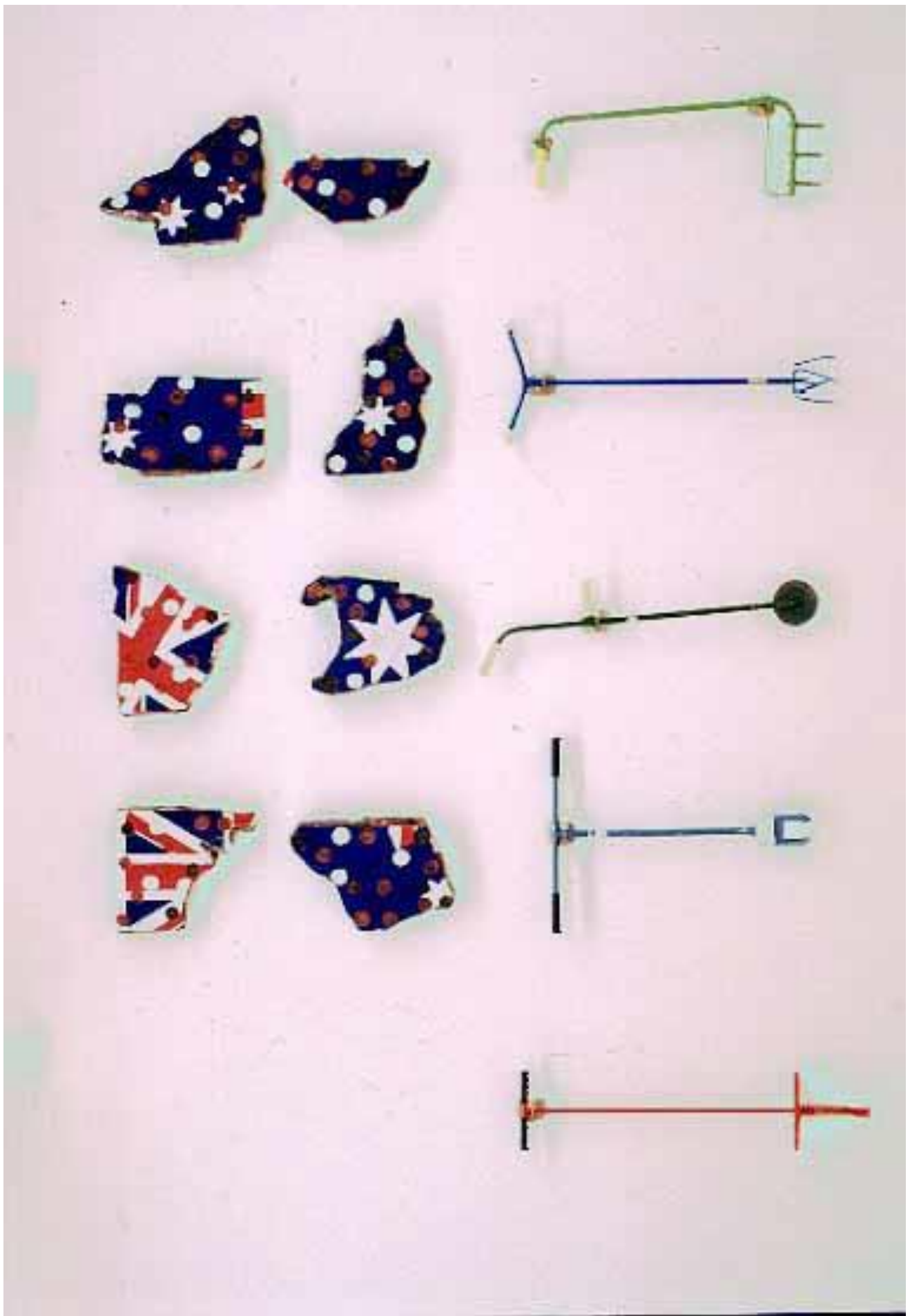


Figure [6] Julia Cough, *The Sub-Dividing Combs: Doggeranby 2000 – Tool for Land Reclamation vs Tools for Land Degradation* (1997)

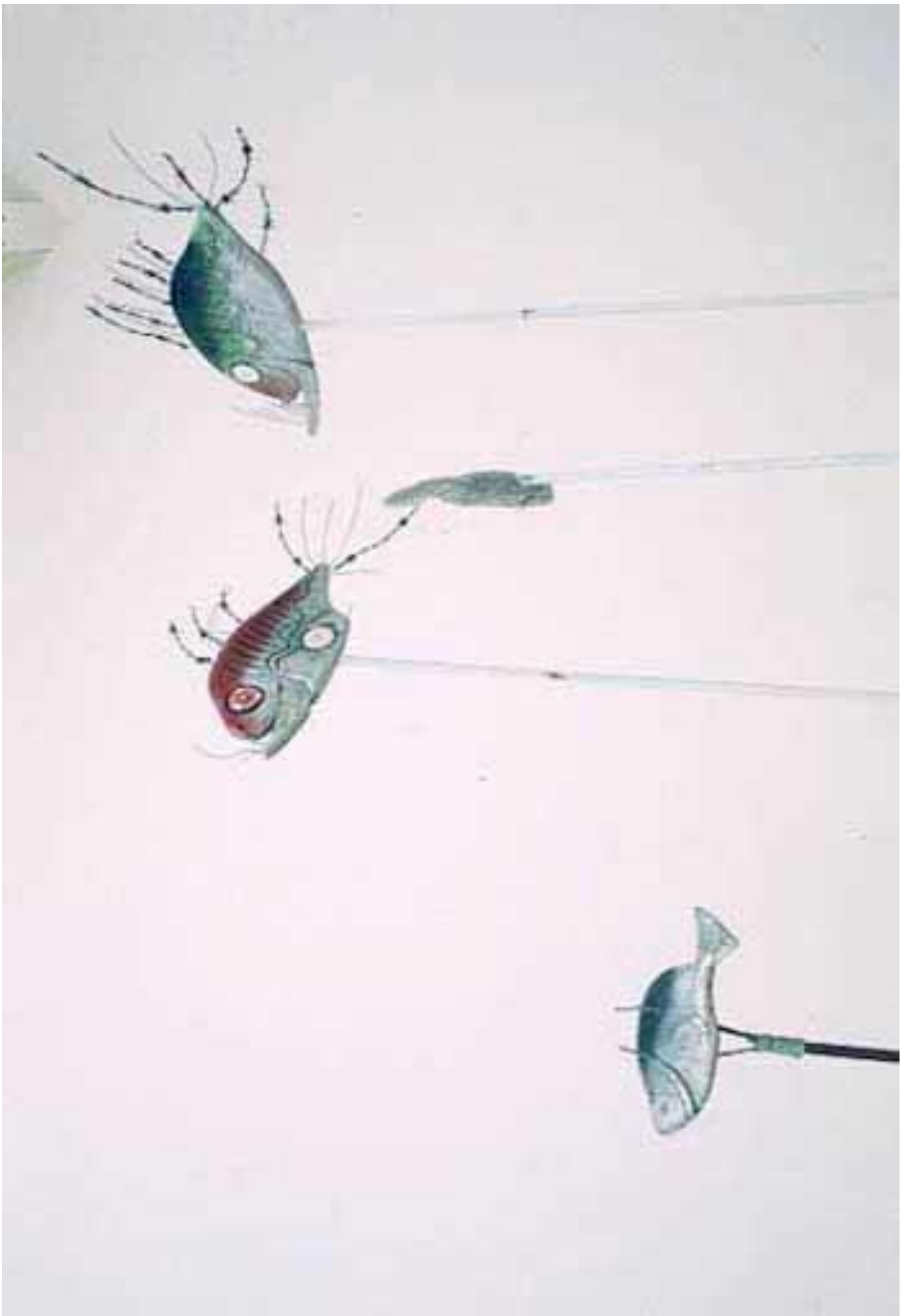


Figure [7] Laurie Nilsen, Pauline's Pecking Order (1997).



Figure [9] Gordon Hookey, Pinklash, Backlash, Backlash.



Figure [10] Bianca Beetson, *Me Me, Me and You, Emu Dreaming* (1997).



Figure [11] Richard Bell, *Aboriginal Art It's a White Thing* (2003).

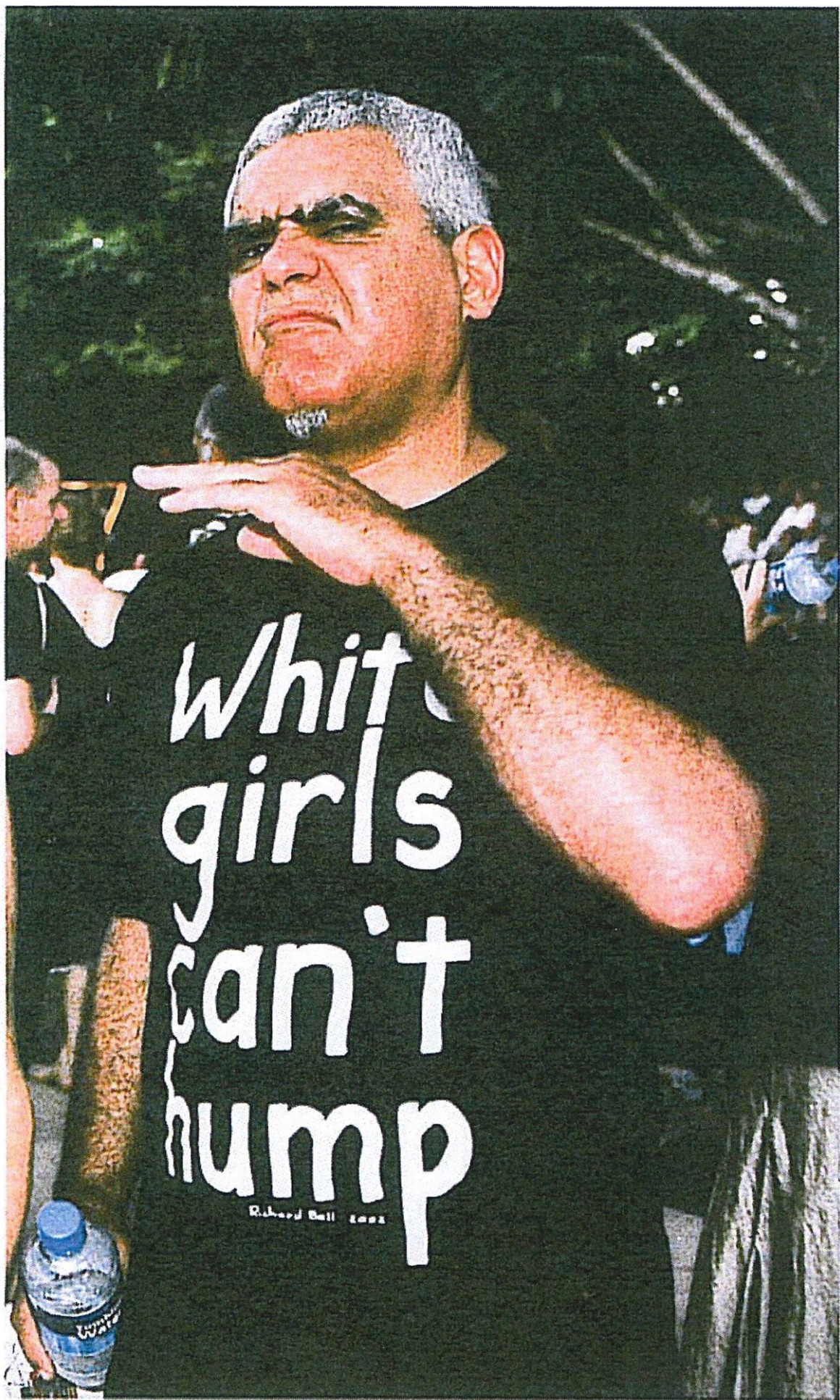


Figure [12] Richard Bell, *White Girls Can't Hump* (2002).



Figure [13] Fiona Foley HHH.

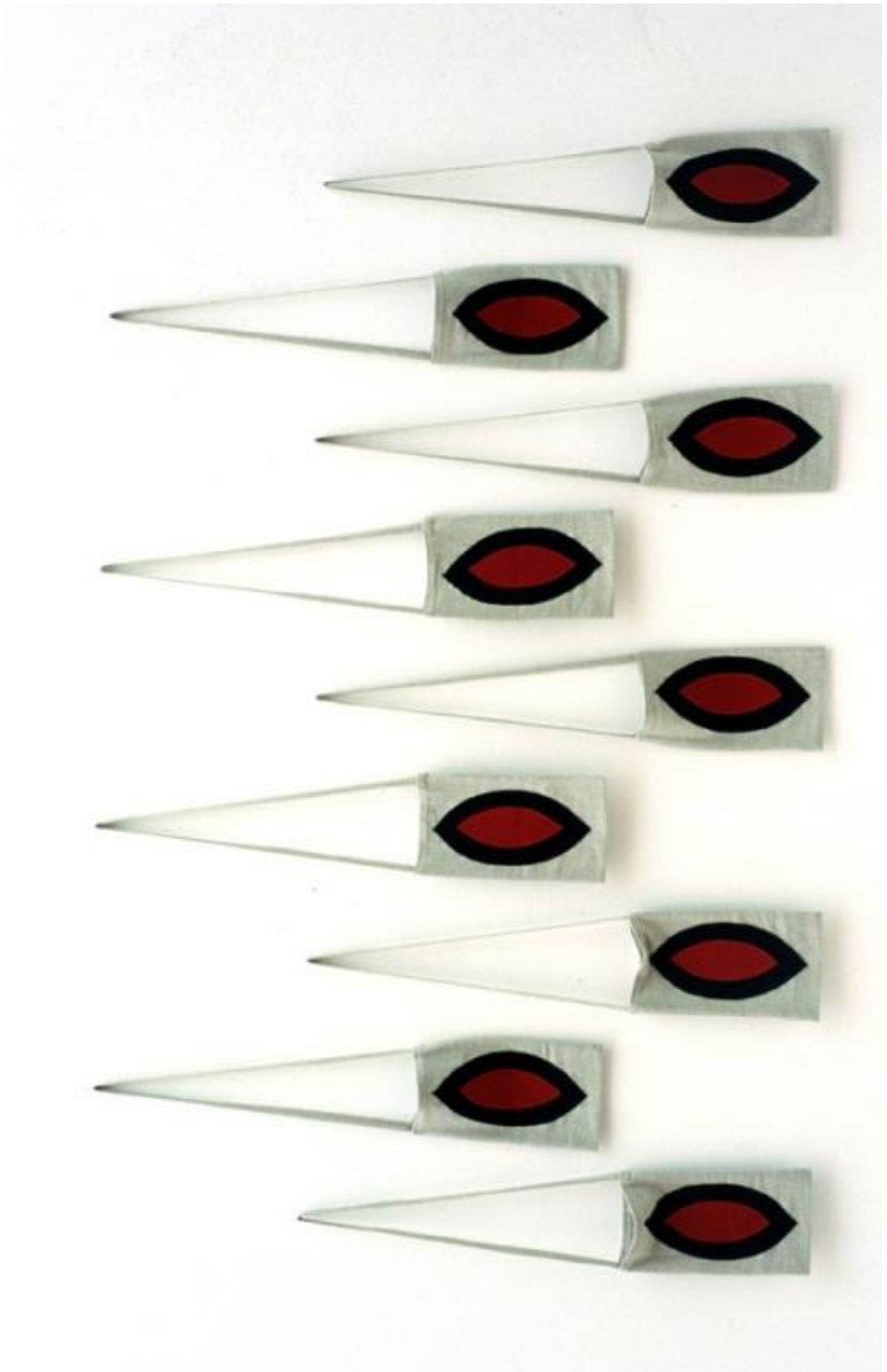


Figure [14] Fiona Foley, *Black Velvet* (1996).



Figure [15] Destiny Deacon, *Over the Fence* (2000).



Figure [16] Destiny Deacon, *Adoption* (1993-2000).

